BUILD A $1000 GAME PC

Computer Games

EXCLUSIVE!

Lord of the Rings Online

Do the MONSTER PLAY mash!
Turbine's RADICAL player-vs.-player combat EXPOSED

Power to the Pixels!

In-game PROTESTS take off ONLINE

Want to be this guy?
see pg. 48

D.I.Y. PC 101

TIPS for building your NEXT SYSTEM

PLUS AMD vs. Intel, to RAID or not to RAID, and shut your PC up

NOVEMBER 2006 | ISSUE 191 | www.cgonline.com

Our boys took Carentan street by street. They stuck together and stayed alive.
Command intelligent troops who use teamwork and seek their own cover.
The fighting in Cherbourg was fierce. Whole blocks were destroyed, but we took the city.
Destroy walls or buildings for tactical advantage on fully destructible battlefields.
A Thunderbolt gives an early Fourth of July show at a German supply depot.
Use the full arsenal of WWII weaponry as you lead Able Company in epic D-Day battles.
Games for Windows
PC DVD
COMPANY of HEROES
96%
M
IGN.com BEST OF E3 2005 WINNER
GAME CRITICS AWARD BEST OF E3 2005 WINNER
BEST OF SHOW E3 2005 EDITORS' CHOICE
AVAILABLE NOW
www.companyofheroesgame.com
relic ENTERTAINMENT
THQ
MATURE 17+
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE
Games for Windows
Play to win with intel Core 2 Extreme inside
Command your Company of Heroes with Intel Core® 2 Extreme Processor Technology!
The way it's meant to be played NVIDIA
TEXT COH TO 69847

© 2006 THQ Inc. Developed by Relic Entertainment. NVIDIA, the NVIDIA logo, GeForce and "The Way It's Meant to be Played" Logo are registered trademarks and/or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation in the United States and other countries. Intel, the Intel logo, Intel Core and Core Inside are trademarks or registered trademarks of Intel Corporation or its subsidiaries in the United States and other countries. THQ, Relic Entertainment, Company of Heroes and their respective logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of THQ Inc. All rights reserved. All other trademarks, logos and copyrights are property of their respective owners. © 2006 THQ Wireless Inc., All Rights Reserved. All other trademarks, logos and copyrights are property of their respective owners. Compatible phone and service required. Text messaging and data service usage charges may apply. Microsoft, Microsoft Games Studio logo, and the Games for Windows logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries.

From award-winning Relic Entertainment comes the next generation in real time strategy gaming. Take command of America's finest troops in their finest hour. From the brutal landing at Omaha Beach to the heroic push inland, lead your men against the German war machine through some of the most crucial battles of WWII.

FORGE YOUR

RAIL EMPIRE

SID MEIER RETURNS TO REINVENT THE GAME THAT LAUNCHED THE "TYCOON" GENRE.

Creators of the world's best strategy game, Sid Meier and Firaxis Games put you in charge of building the greatest rail empire in the nation! Manage trains, cargo and your bottom line while engaging in all-out corporate warfare against rival tycoons, slick entrepreneurs and robber barons!

Build your dream railroad world or dive into competition against J. Pierpont Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt and others!

Lay track, expand towns and cities, transport goods and watch the world come to life.

User created scenarios and map editing support. Want to create a race to complete a transcontinental railroad in 30 years using only steam engines? No problem!

Ruthless LAN and online multiplayer. Sabotage your rivals and monopolize the industry.

SID MEIER'S RAILROADS!™

www.sidmeiersrailroads.com

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB — Alcohol Reference

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

The way it's meant to be played — NVIDIA

POWERED BY gamespy

FIRAXIS GAMES

2K

© 2006 Take-Two Interactive Software and its subsidiaries. All rights reserved. Sid Meier's Railroads!, 2K Games, the 2K logo, Firaxis Games, the Firaxis Games logo and Take-Two Interactive Software are all trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. Developed by Firaxis Games. The "Powered by GameSpy" design are trademarks of GameSpy Industries, Inc. The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. NVIDIA, the NVIDIA Logo, and other NVIDIA Marks are registered trademarks or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation in the United States and other countries. All rights reserved. All other marks and trademarks are the property of their respective owners. Based on Civilization IV rating at gamerankings.com.

YOU'VE SENT 10,000 MEN TO THE HOLY LAND TO WAGE A CRUSADE.

YOUR SHIPS ARE RACING TO CLAIM THE NEW WORLD AND ITS RICHES.

AND AN ENEMY ARMY IS ABOUT TO LAY SIEGE TO YOUR NEW CASTLE.

RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

TOTAL WAR™

the CREATIVE ASSEMBLY™

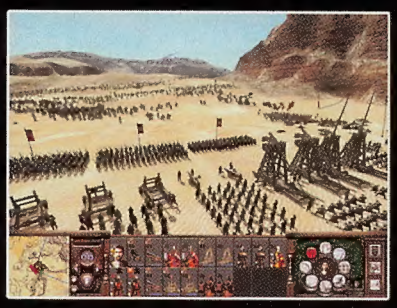
POWERED BY gamespy

© 2006 The Creative Assembly Limited. Total War, Medieval: Total War, and the Total War logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of The Creative Assembly Limited in the United Kingdom and/or other countries. SEGA is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. SEGA and the SEGA logo are either trademarks or registered trademarks of SEGA Corporation. All rights reserved.

Actual in-game screenshots.

THE BATTLES ARE ONLY THE BEGINNING.

Once the shields have clashed and battles been won, there is still a nation to build. Manage your economy, spread your religion, and use assassins and princesses to cripple or seduce your enemies. Wage war with armies and agents to become the undisputed ruler of the medieval world.



NOVEMBER 2006

www.totalwar.com

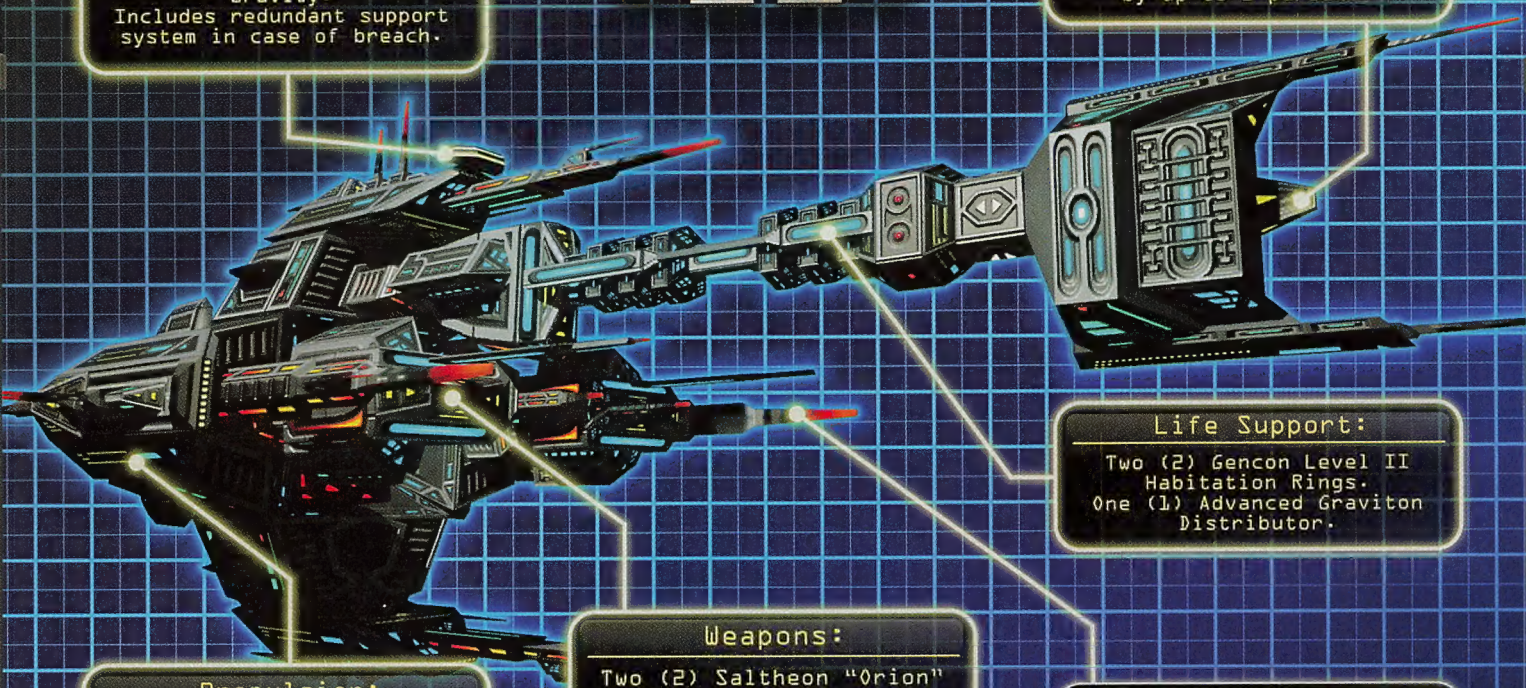
SEGA®

www.sega.com

Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords

Bridge:
Self-sustaining module supports Level III Artificial Gravity.
Includes redundant support system in case of breach.

Sensors:
Sabre Dynamics Mark III Sensor Grid extends range by up to 3 parsecs.



Life Support:
Two (2) Gencon Level II Habitation Rings.
One (1) Advanced Graviton Distributor.

Weapons:
Two (2) Saltheon "Orion" G3 Heavy Particle Beams.
One (1) Northrop Ltd. Mark II Rail Gun.

Propulsion:
Two (2) Northington "Vulcan VI" HyperDrive Reactors.
One (1) Locksteed-Miller Newtonian Fusion Drive.

Defenses:
Duranthium II armor plating.
Two (2) Omega Deflector II Generators.

NAME:	TAS Harbinger	ACCELERATION:	2.1g	RACE:	Terran Alliance
CLASS:	"Hyperion" Class Attack Cruiser	SPEED:	2.0 Parsecs / Week	CREW COMPLEMENT:	432
LENGTH:	225 Meters	RANGE:	3.2 Sectors	DESIGNER:	YOU!
SPAN:	57 Meters	ATTACK RATING	4 / 1 / 0		
MASS:	2.53 Million Metric Tons	DEFENSE:	2 / 0 / 1		

IT'S NEVER THE SAME GALAXY TWICE!

IN STORES NOW!

- Play as one of 10 different races or create your own.
- Build your own interstellar empire.
- Design your own starships.
- Negotiate trade agreements, alliances, & more.
- Conquer the galaxy through military might, cultural influence, diplomatic skill or technological dominance.
- Infinite replayability; it's never the same galaxy twice.

Stardock

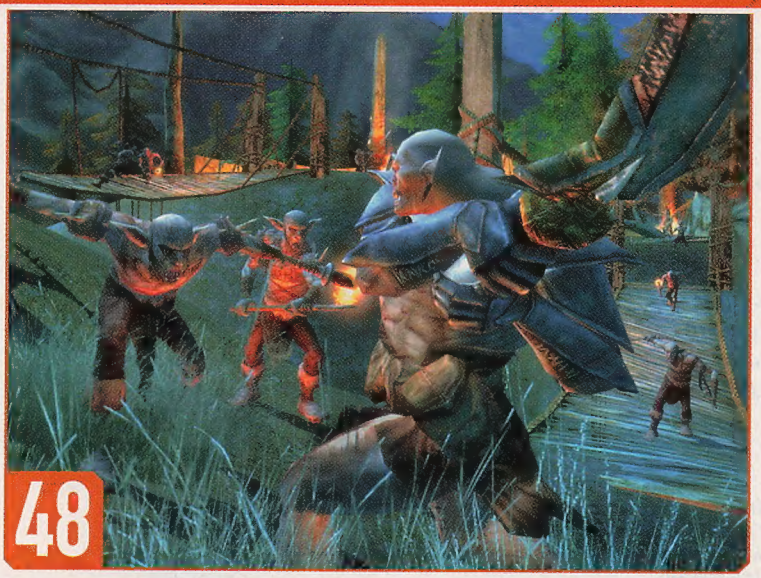
PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

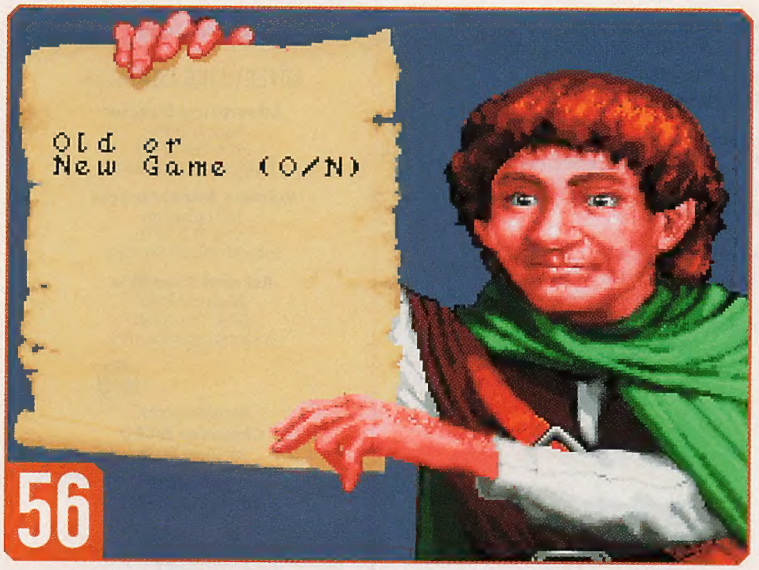
E 10+ EVERYONE 10+ Language Mild Fantasy Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

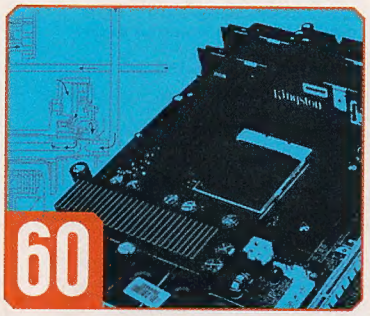
WWW.GALCIV2.COM

CONTENTS

November 2006 | Issue 191







cover story

48 There and Hack Again
Is giving Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar a good dose of PvP like trying to force a Balrog through the eye of a needle? Turbine will find out next year. **By Cindy Yans**

56 Touched by Other Minds
Tolkien hasn't been treated well by videogames. A Tolkien scholar and game designer tells you why. **By Daniel Greenberg**

featured

30 A T-80 in the BK drive-thru
World in Conflict gives you a chance to protect fast food franchises everywhere. **By Matthew Gallant**

36 A Tale of Two Protests
It was the best of bans; it was the worst of bans. The next round of the First Amendment game starts… right… now. **By Lara Crigger**

40 The Military-Entertainment Complex
War, huh, good God, y'all. What is it good for? Videogames, say it again. Welcome to the next level of realism and fun. Let the controversy begin. **By Lara Crigger**

60 D.I.Y. PC 101
We'll help you build a $1000 game PC, shut your existing one up, and help you make smarter buying choices for your homebrewed system. **By Steve Bauman and Paul Jastrzebski**

70 The Thrilla in the Villa
Relic Entertainment's Company of Heroes reboots World War II. **By Tom Chick**

84 Cool Hot Stuff
Voodoo PC's liquid-cooled Omen a:121 takes high-end performance to new high-endedness. **By Steve Bauman**

94 Pimp Your Civ IV
Surrender your life to Sid Meier again, one turn at a time, with these mods for Civilization IV. **By Brett Todd**

98 Board Games… of the Dead
Celebrate All Hallows Eve in cardboard form with these horrific adventures. **By Brett Todd**

CONTENTS

departments

22 Rebound
24 Speak Out
36 Newswire

incoming

30 World of Conflict
34 Ultima Online Reborn
32 Elveon
32 Overlord
34 PrisonServer: The Online Prison

reviews

70 Company of Heroes
72 Age of Pirates
74 CivCity Rome
75 Dungeon Siege II: Broken World
78 Evolution GT
79 Madden NFL 2007
80 FlatOut 2
82 Sword of the Stars

hardware

84 Voodoo Omen a:121
85 Auzen Tech HDA Xplosion Connect DTS
85 Razer Barracuda
87 Gateway FX-510XL

online

88 Road to Nowhere

mod & ends

90 Out of the Box
91 Cardboard Corner
92 Mod Squads
93 Alt.Games

insider

16 **Upfront**
In Praise of Dumb: Embrace and celebrate gaming's inherent stupidity.
By Steve Bauman

103 **Applied Game Theory**
I Love Rock 'n' Roll: Shredding and wailing with Guitar Hero.
By Henry Jenkins and Kurt Squire

104 **Random Incoherence**
GG, GN, GL HF: A fond, ephemeral farewell to the greatest MMO ever.
By Kelly Wand

106 **Three Finger Salute**
The End of History: Or "Keep your god powers out of my game."
By Tom Chick

demo disk

DVD FTW

We have another DVD this month, and it's filled to the brim with demos. First up are *Joint Task Force* and *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*, two games that couldn't possibly be further apart in subject matter and style. Blow stuff up or calmly fly the friendly skies... it's your choice. Also, we have the sublime *Lego Star Wars II*, the simulation-y *GTR2*, the action-y western *Call of Juarez*, and the cartoon-y *Bad Day L.A.* There's also some indie games, wallpapers from the nice chaps at gamewallpapers.com... it's all good.

INSTRUCTIONS The disc should autoplay once placed in your CD-ROM. If it does not, double-click on CGCD.EXE to launch the interface. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original to: Computer Games, ATTN: CD Replacement, 65 Millet St. Richmond, VT 05477.

Computer Games
www.cgonline.com

EDITORIAL

Editor-in-Chief
Steve Bauman
sbauman@cgonline.com

Features Editor
Cindy Yans
cyans@cgonline.com

Contributing Editors
Margot Harrison
Tiffany Martin

Online Editor
Jonathan Trevisani

ART/PRODUCTION

Associate Art Director
Scott Wild
swild@cgonline.com

Graphic Designer
Ryan Cohen

Web Master
Damien Huze

ADVERTISING CONTACTS

Advertising Director
Jayson Dubin
(954) 769-5916
jdubin@cgonline.com

Western Sales Manager
Jeff Lubetkin
(818) 222-7516
jlubetkin@cgonline.com

Account Executive
Melinda Pino
(954) 769-5928
mpino@cgonline.com

theglobe.com
Chairman & CEO
Michael Egan

President
Edward Cespedes

games.theglobe.com
Vice President & Publisher
Jayson Dubin

Associate Publisher
Liz Halgas

Comptroller
Bruce Jones

Marketing Manager
Amy Greenfeig

Marketing Coordinator
Jay Suarez

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES

US Subscriptions: (800) 283-3542
Outside US Subscriptions: (815) 734-1216
Online Subscriptions: www.cgonline.com
subscriptions@cgonline.com
PO Box 1965, Marion, OH 43306-8065

12 issues Basic Rate US: $19.97 or $29.97 with CD
Canada: $31.97 or $41.97 with CD
Foreign: $43.97 or $53.97 with CD

Back issues available @ 1-800-699-4263

Distributor: Curtis Circulation Co. (201) 634-7400

Reprints available. Foreign reprint rights available.

Editorial Offices:
65 Millet Street, Suite 203, Richmond, VT 05477
PH: (802) 434-3060 FAX: (802) 434-6493
editor@cgonline.com

© 2006 Strategy Plus, Inc. All rights reserved.
Reproduction without permission is prohibited. Unsolicited submissions become the property of Strategy Plus, Inc. If you wish to make a submission, please contact the editors.

You are one with the land. Bury your enemies in it.

Defend the Americas as the mighty Sioux, Iroquois, or Aztecs. As a WarChief, command beasts of the forest, strengthen units, and speed them to the point of attack. Sway fierce battles in your favor against encroaching European forces. Your power grows as you master new maps and a new single player campaign. This land will bear your legacy forever. www.ageofempires3.com

Games for Windows

Microsoft game studios

ENSEMBLE STUDIOS

TEEN T Blood Violence

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

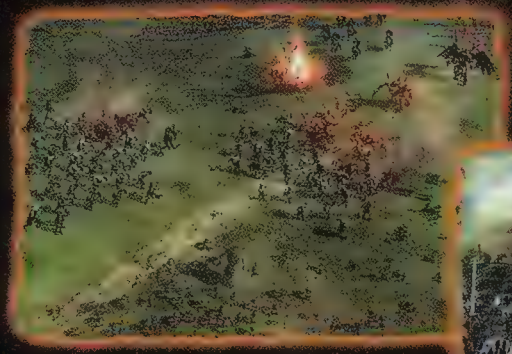
WARHAMMER® MARK OF CHAOS™

AN EPIC BATTLE RAGES FOLLOWING A BRUTAL CHAOS INVASION, THREATENING THE REALMS OF THE EMPIRE.

Fearsome battle cries of the savage Hordes of Chaos echo through the Forest of Shadows:

"Blood for the Blood God!"

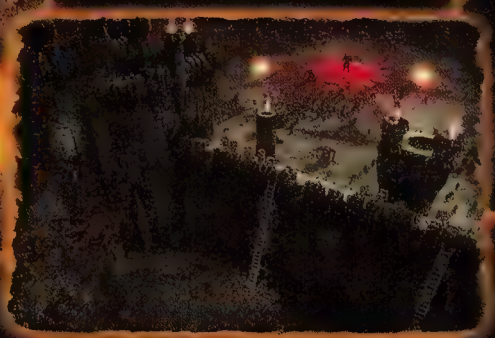
Calling upon Sigmar's divine blessing, a Warrior Priest inspires faith among the soldiers of the Empire. With their patron God's protection, they grimly turn to face the oncoming horrors.



Dynamic cooperative campaign mode and a full assortment of multiplayer modes for both casual and competitive gamers.

Take customization to a new level with body part swaps, weapon and armor enhancements, and more powerful controls to paint units and customize banners.

As armies battle, Heroes and Champions learn new tactics, unlock new abilities, command larger units, even challenge each other in a duel to the death.



Epic sense of both scale and detail where big demons and huge beautifully rendered battalions clash with thousands of characters battling on screens in intricate detail.

You could win the ultimate gaming PC and more!
Go to http://www.markofchaos.com/win
USE ENTRY CODE: CGM2TS

RP Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

Logitech

gamespy

The way it's meant to be played

Sound Blaster X-Fi TECHNOLOGY

BLACK HOLE ENTERTAINMENT

DIGIC PICTURES

CINERGI INTERACTIVE

BANDAI NAMCO Games

© Copyright Games Workshop Ltd 2006. All Rights Reserved. Games Workshop, Warhammer, Warhammer: Mark of Chaos, and all associated races, race insignia, marks, names, characters, illustrations and images from the Warhammer: Mark of Chaos game and the Warhammer world are either ®, TM and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2000-2006, variably registered in the UK and other countries around the world, used under license by NAMCO BANDAI Games America Inc. All Rights Reserved. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks and trade names are the properties of their respective owners.

QUEST WITH THE BEST!
Extend your game with Echoes of Faydwer™ – the latest expansion – offering exciting content for players of all levels, from 1 to 70.
Explore a new Arabian Nights styled city and experience arena play in the exotic and dangerous shifting sands of the Desert of Flames™.
RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.
PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE
SOE
SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
The way it's meant to be played™
NVIDIA.
WWW.EVERQUEST2.COM

© 2006 Sony Online Entertainment LLC. EverQuest, SOE and the SOE logo are registered trademarks and Desert of Flames, Kingdom of Sky and Echoes of Faydwer are trademarks of Sony Online Entertainment LLC. The software platform logo (TM and ©) IEMA 2004. The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. The NVIDIA logo and the "The way it's meant to be played" logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation. All other trademarks or trade names are properties of their respective owners. All rights reserved.

A BOLD NEW ADVENTURE AWAITS THE BRAVE AT HEART.

Experience the intense action of the Player vs. Player servers – the heart-pounding adrenaline rush of hunting and being targeted by other like-minded players.

Expand your horizons with Kingdom of Sky's achievement system, which differentiates skills and abilities and introduces warring dragon lords.

EverQuest II is the adventure of choice for true MMO enthusiasts. Celebrated, steadfast and content-rich, it's the MMO that has it all. Now every EQII adventure can be yours with the all-in-one pack. For a taste of the action, download the free 7-day trial at www.trialoftheisle.com.

EVERQUEST II

Echoes of Faydwer

INCLUDES ALL THREE EXPANSIONS RELEASED TO DATE!

by Steve Bauman

In Praise of Dumb

Embrace and celebrate gaming's inherent stupidity

"I adore games because they're disposable pop culture. I like them because they're dumb, not because they're smart."

I like to pretend I'm a "very serious person™" with "very serious interests™" and "very serious thoughts™." I'm a deep thinker. I like to mull over the profound. I like to philosophize. I eat Proust for breakfast and sneeze profundities. I am so smart, S M R T.

So, if pressed to justify my existence—i.e., my job—I might try to convince people that gaming is a "bold and daring new art form" and/or the "future of entertainment." I'd point to benchmark, high-art titles. Maybe toss out a *Planescape Torment*, a *Civilization*, or if I'm feeling particularly monocle-y, an *Ico*. I'd serve up some theory, or some highbrow smarty-pants terminology.

But it's all an act.

I adore games because they're disposable pop culture. I like them because they're dumb, not because they're smart.

I tend to play this game of "pretend I'm deep" with all forms of entertainment and art. I may bring up the classic books I've read—and mostly understood—but I spend most of my time consuming trashier fare (as in, books that are actually readable). I might try to convince people that the dissonance and experimentation in Radiohead's *Hail to the Thief* are pure art, while wishing they'd come up with something as listenable as *The Bends* again.

I might go see indie films, digging that post-30s malaise and ennui that you find in most of them, but I'm also first in line to see the latest brain-dead Hollywood blockbuster. Not out of some sense of ironic hipster detachment, but because I totally dig big, dumb fun. My favorite movie of 2006? *Poseidon*. It's so bad it flips around to being awesome. I'll be saying, "I'm an architect" at inappropriate times for the rest of my life.

When it comes to games, I'd rather walk through doors in *Prey* that look like vaginas than play games that question my existence. I'd rather kill zombies in *Dead Rising* than confront man's place in this world. Unless the world is full of zombies, in which case I'm so there.

(That's not entirely true. My lifelong devotion to *Civilization* is well documented. But can you imagine "Civilization of the Dead"? Watch out for Zombie Genghis Khan.)

Valve's *Team Fortress 2* is on the leading edge of dumb. If you've seen screenshots or the gameplay videos released during the Leipzig show in Germany in late August, you'll know it looks fantastic. It takes the standard, serious online military multiplayer shooter clichés—established largely by the original *Team Fortress*—and turns them into a Pixar-like cartoon. Watching the video is more entertaining than playing a round of *Battlefield 2*.

Some fans are up in arms—"Blasphemy!" they say. "It used to be a serious military game." But the video demonstrates why the approach is so brilliant. Multiplayer gaming is inherently dumb. We may think we're serious soldiers, fighting the good fight, but once the shooting starts, we start jumping around like caffeinated 10-year-olds. We throw rockets and grenades around a room like a credit card company handing out credit card applications in a student union. If we shoot a compadre, we say, "Oops, sorry dude" and laugh instead of contemplating the horrors of friendly fire.

There's a reason why the most beloved adventure games are comedies. The *Monkey Island*s and *Sam & Max*es rewarded and encouraged stupidity on the part of players. The legendary comedy *Gabriel Knight 3* featured a puzzle where you fashioned a fake moustache using cat hair, masking tape, and maple syrup. (How you acquired these items—and why you needed the moustache in the first place—involved some Texas-sized leaps of logic, and describing the whole scenario in any detail would require another article.)

When it comes to MMOs, I give all of my characters dumb names, like Doofus, Gabbagabba, and my new favorites that I created on a role-playing server, Zaxxahn and Galahgha. I apologize in advance if my sense of dumb fun gets in the way of your really role-playing your sexy Undead Rogue, but come on. Blizzard gets that the cartoon look lends itself to silly. Why do you think there are auctioneers in *World of WarCraft* named "O'Reely" and "Yarly"? O RLY? YA RLY.

So, I come here not to condemn dumb, but to praise it. To embrace it. To suggest that everyone get in touch with their inner idiot. Dumb is what makes games so fun. ■

AS REAL AS IT GETS

CONGRATULATIONS. YOU'VE Rrighted YOUR PLANE. NEXT UP: EMERGENCY LANDING IN THE JUNGLES OF THE CONGO.

After that, let's see you rescue an injured climber on Mt. Kilimanjaro. Or take on the world's best pilots in the Red Bull Air Races. With 23 aircraft and over 50 real-world missions, it's the most realistic version yet. Whole cities and airports have been faithfully recreated with a 16X overall improvement in terrain graphics. Suddenly, calling it a "simulator" just doesn't seem right.

[ACTUAL GAME SCREEN SHOT]

Microsoft game studios

Games for Windows

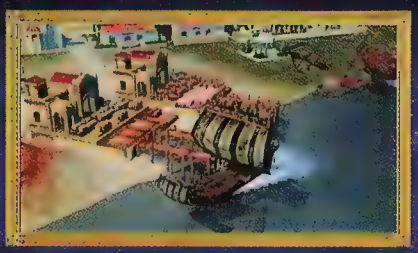
intel Core 2

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

© 2006 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved. Microsoft, Windows and the Microsoft Games Studios logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries. Intel, the Intel logo, Intel Inside, Intel Core, and the Intel Centrino logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Intel Corporation or its subsidiaries in the U.S. and other countries. Take flight with Intel Technology.

THE CONQUEROR

An amazing new graphics engine delivers impressive detail from every possible angle.



Command a massive economy, with over 45 goods and services, both within your cities and through foreign trade routes.

Experience the Living City as your citizens work, prosper, and thrive in realistic ways.

BEHOLD THE REBIRTH OF THE BEST-SELLING

HISTORICAL CITY BUILDER SERIES

HAS RETURNED

Rule wisely or be prepared to deal with fires, plagues, and riots.

CAESAR IV

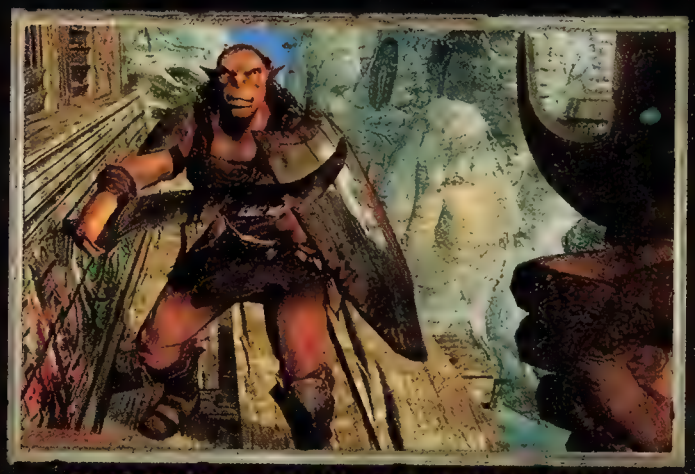
Tilted Mill

SIERRA

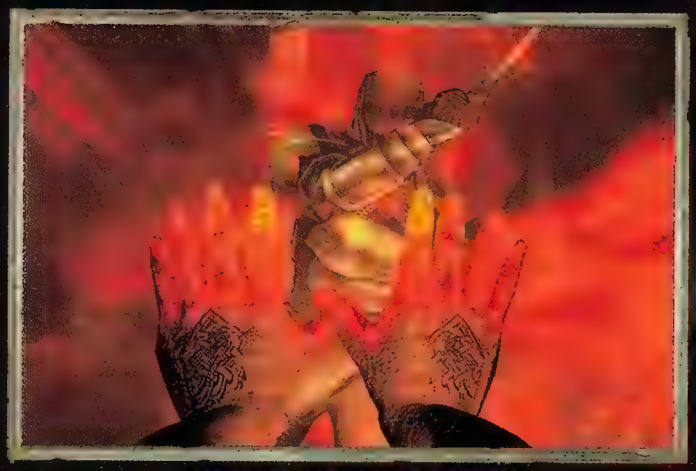
RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

©2006 Sierra Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved. Caesar, Sierra and the Sierra logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of Sierra Entertainment, Inc. in the U.S. and/or other countries. Developed by Tilted Mill Entertainment, Inc. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners.



FIRST-PERSON MELEE COMBAT RENDERED WITH
BREATHTAKING VISUALS AND EARTH-SHATTERING PHYSICS.



SWORDS. STEALTH. SORCERY.
CHOOSE YOUR WAY TO KILL.

UPGRADE YOUR SKILLS IN ONLINE BATTLES WITH
UP TO 32 PLAYERS IN THE EPIC CRUSADE MODE.

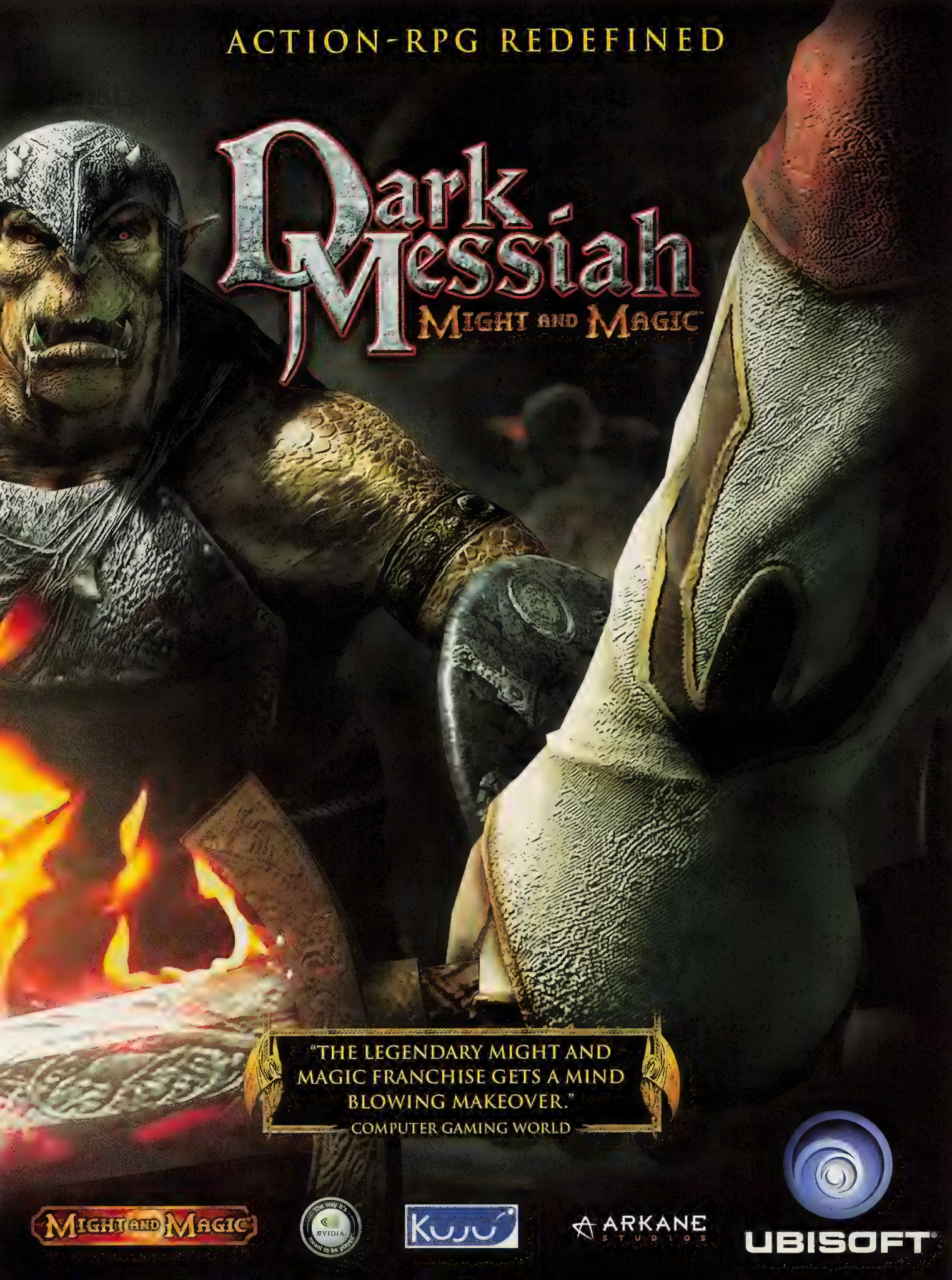
RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

WWW.MIGHTANDMAGIC.COM

© 2006 Ubisoft Entertainment. All Rights Reserved. Might and Magic, Dark Messiah Might and Magic, Ubisoft, Ubi.com, and the Ubisoft logo are trademarks of Ubisoft Entertainment in the U.S. and/or other countries. Developed by Arkane Studios and Floodgate Entertainment. Valve, Half-Life, and Source are trademarks or registered trademarks of Valve Corporation in the United States and/or other countries. Online mode developed by Kuji. NVIDIA, the NVIDIA Eye Logo, and The Way it's Meant to Be Played Logo are registered trademarks and/or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation in the United States and other countries. Software platform logo TM and © IEMA 2003.


ACTION-RPG REDEFINED
Dark Messiah
MIGHT AND MAGIC
"THE LEGENDARY MIGHT AND MAGIC FRANCHISE GETS A MIND BLOWING MAKEOVER."
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD
MIGHT AND MAGIC
NVIDIA.
KOJO
ARKANE STUDIOS
UBISOFT

Hey there, you crazy kids. A number of you took issue with Donna Collins' letter in September complaining about "racy" content in this fine, upstanding, nonpornographic publication. Most of your responses included words too dirty for us to reproduce here; think body parts, the ones your mom told you were disgusting. (Maybe that was just our parents?) Thanks for having our backs. Anyway, we're starting to run out of Speak Out submissions, so if you have a burning desire to take on a major gaming topic like "Saved Games: Why?" fire off your missives and screeds to editor@cgonline.com.

Sid Meier's Railroads!

I usually hate preview features, because I find them useless. They contain a bunch of marketing hype, either breathlessly reported, or couched in the sort of faux-objective tone that preview writers think makes them sound like serious journalists, because they're afraid of sounding too much like hype merchants.

But I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed the feature on *Sid Meier's Railroads!*. I was actually going to just skip it until I happened to read one of the sidebars, the one on the dinosaur game. I had never heard the real story of what happened with that, and that little blurb was the perfect explanation.

Then I saw Sid Meier on *CPU Bach*. Then I saw something else, and then I decided to read the whole feature, and enjoyed it tremendously, especially the boardgame session. The way the actual feature was written—as an account of a multiplayer test game—was a great approach. In fact, the whole article was an example of a type of feature preview I had never seen before: a clever, well-written, interesting one.

Kudos to Tom Chick for doing such an excellent job, and to you for putting it together.

–Jim Loeszli

Desperate Gamers

A *Desperate Housewives* game? Ugh! Yuck! Blecch! If you want to get women to play, I'd start by targeting the *Dungeon Siege* games at girls and turning *American McGee's Alice* into a first-person shooter with more AI baddies to slaughter.

For housewives, I'd recommend turn-based strategy games like *Heroes of Might and Magic*, something amusing like *Stubbs the Zombie* or *Fable*, something with lots of exploration like *Oblivion*, or puzzle games that can last forever like *Myst*.

Keep *Barbie* in the kids' aisle where she belongs, and trashy programs on the TV.

–Allaiyah Weyn

That doesn't mean that I don't want challenge. The need for thought, planning, and reflexes can all make a game more exciting. It's just that I don't want a level of difficulty that requires a lot of gaming skill, the kind that requires a lot of practice. I want most of the game to be of low challenge, so that I can immerse myself in the story, keep a bit of skill from that challenge, and get occasional excitement from a higher challenge level.

–Eyal Teler

"In fact, the whole article was an example of a type of feature preview I had never seen before: a clever, well-written, interesting one."

Making Time

I like the term "Hardcore Casual." I'm not sure it's the best descriptive term, but it's better than nothing, and so useful to have. I certainly see myself as this kind of gamer.

I don't think that there's anything inherently wrong with the current type or length of games, though. For example, I play *City of Heroes* and *City of Villains*. While I played a lot initially, I only play a couple of hours a week now. Both work well for a "hardcore casual" gamer, because they're easy enough and don't require improved skill as they progress.

What's Gothic 3?

I just wanted to ask why you have no coverage on *Gothic 3*. I'm a fan of the series, and wonder why you only preview the rival *Neverwinter Nights 2*, but not the better game?

–Manuel

What is this Gothic 3 *of which you speak? Oh, you mean that game on our October cover? –ed*

Random Incoherence

I'm shredding! I'm going to mars!

–Charley Fate Rowland

©2002-2006 Sigil Games Online, Inc. Vanguard Saga of Heroes is a registered trademark of Sigil Games Online, Inc. SOE and the SOE logo are registered trademarks and "Set Yourself Free" is a trademark of Sony Online Entertainment LLC. The software platform logo (™ and ©) IEMA 2004. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks are properties of their respective owners. All rights reserved.

SPEAKOUT MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

Staring at a Wall

By Natalie Nygren

It's late in the evening or early the next morning; at this point, I'm not entirely certain. Rayshan is still investigating the wall in the training hall. I spent hours working on her clothing, her bone structure, her skin color, hair color, and style. She's a looker. Her skin's a pale porcelain, and she has a head of deep onyx hair. Her eyes smolder a dark blue, and she is tall, with limbs that stretch to each edge of my monitor. She is a veritable orgasm on legs. OK. I exaggerate a little.

There's a problem, however. I seem to have forgotten to put a brain in that fine head of hers. Ray has been, and still is, staring at a wall in the training hall, apparently investigating the fine grout-work between the rocks. I wish I knew what she found so incredibly interesting, but at this point, I'm at a complete loss, and she's not talking. Persuading her to move isn't hard—it's persuading her where to move that's the problem. Ray is just really into grout and rock walls, and no matter where I direct her, she always seems to blow my suggestion off and walk to the next wall, her lovely button nose pasted tightly to the grout. I wonder if she's farsighted. I wonder if I didn't perhaps create a character who is channeling a mason, instead of being an Elven scribe as I intended.

"The first game I fell in love with wouldn't even attract my 12-year-old daughter nowadays."

I consider myself a reasonably intelligent adult, so why are games so difficult for me? I want to like games. I need to like games. I read gaming magazines every month, and lots of them. I purchased *Neverwinter Nights* and *The Sims* because of the good reviews they received. My reality, however, seems to fall a bit short. I don't feel the reviews were off-base; I just think my expectations aren't easily met.

The first game I fell in love with wouldn't even attract my 12-year-old daughter nowadays. *Pirate Adventure* and *Tombstone City* on the TI-99/4A system were my earliest fascinations. I never finished *Pirate Adventure*, though. It remains a thorn in my gaming tush, albeit a small one compared with *Neverwinter Nights* and *The Sims*. Those early games didn't just capture my eye; they captured my mind and imagination.

I stared at the package for *Neverwinter Nights* a long time in the store, feeling somewhat torn. I have games I've purchased that I don't play, and their boxes gather dust while the programs take up disk space. If I'm going to waste money on something frivolous and unnecessary, I prefer it to be something that I know I'll use and enjoy, like new shoes or a CD. I don't have time for maybes.

The box, though. The artwork. Fantasy, you see, is my drug of choice. Gnomes and Elves, and collecting treasures, and casting "glare of ice" spells? That is where I am. I enjoy good role play. I considered *Guild Wars* and *World of WarCraft*. However, I figured I'd start small and simple. I'd get my feet wet with a game that didn't require a huge time investment or a buddy group that most likely wouldn't see me with any degree of regularity. (While I adore gaming, I am many things first, such as a mother, an employee, a writer, and a photographer. I wear a lot of hats.) *The Sims* came along because it was a good deal, a set for a low price. My daughter has been wanting to play it forever. One would think that her very social development was dependent on guiding a cute blond Sim family through its daily life. Sure.

So, I get the games home and open *Neverwinter Nights*. Cool goodies in the box. A nifty book with pages that look like parchment paper. Wait, that's the instruction manual? Oh my goodness. I'm going to be reading about how to play this game for days.

Character movement depends on a variety of things, none of which I seem likely to be able to grasp even if I do read the manual. It seems like I'm stuck in the Stone Age and have no chance of surfacing. Unfortunately, now the hunky trainer character has shown up, and he's equally stuck.

"Hi, Rayshan. I'm here to help you train," intones the strapping man wearing skintight breeches.

Ray stares intensely at the wall, totally ignoring the lad.

"Perhaps we could work on your skills, Rayshan?" he implores, watching her expectantly.

Ray turns and sashays across the room to stare at a different wall, her gaze as intense as before.

The hunky man stands there, looking just as dumbstruck as I when it comes to figuring out why Ray doesn't want to cooperate.

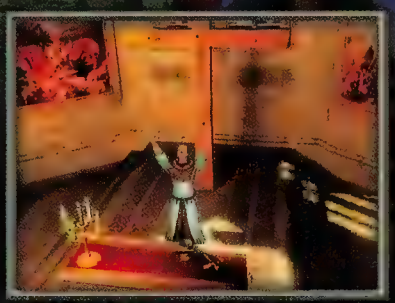
I don't want to worry about how many rounds are left in a weapon, or where the power-up is, or how many gold coins I've collected. I don't want to worry about the level of my health bar or my stamina bar or how long before I can perform seriously cool moves. Conversely, I don't want to sing, dance, play guitar, or braid ribbons into a pony's hair in some conventional "girl" game.

Ah well. Perhaps I'll dig out my TI and *Pirate Adventure* and get the smaller of the thorns out of my arse. Ray will still be staring at the wall when I return. She's sexy and smoldering... and sadly, very predictable. ■

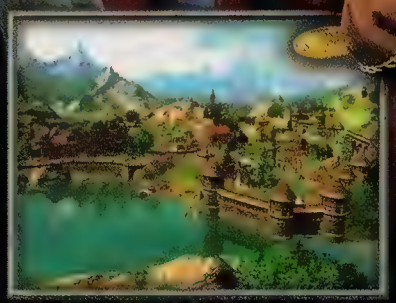
Do you have something to say? So say it! Send all topics and/or completed articles of no more than 800 words to editor@cgonline.com. Articles may be edited for space, or because we want to justify our existence by chopping your piece into little bits.

BUILD YOUR DYNASTY
CONQUER YOUR FOES

The Guild 2



Build and control the fate of a powerful family lineage throughout Europe in the middle ages.



Explore a beautifully crafted and immersive living world in real-time.

Overthrow adversaries using bribery, assassination and treachery.

Medieval Strategy & Simulation Experience Available Now

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

JoWooD Productions

4HEAD

ASPYR

© 2006 by JoWooD Productions Software AG, Playmstraße 40, 8940 Liezen, Austria. Developed by 4HEAD Studios. All rights reserved. The Guild 2 is a trademark of JoWooD Productions Software AG. Published and distributed by Aspyr Media. Aspyr is a registered trademark of Aspyr Media, Inc., and the Aspyr star logo is a trademark of Aspyr Media, Inc. All rights reserved. Software platform [illegible] All trademarks are the property of their respective owners. The use of the game is subject to an End-user license agreement (EULA).

THIS OCTOBER

PHANTASY STAR™

ファンタシースターユニバース

UNIVERSE

NOW FOR THE FIRST TIME WITH BOTH SINGLE-PLAYER AND ONLINE GAMEPLAY!

TEEN
T
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation.2

XBOX 360™

XBOX LIVE

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

SEGA is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. SEGA, the SEGA logo and Phantasy Star Universe are either registered trademarks or trademarks of SEGA Corporation. © SEGA Corporation, 2006. All rights reserved. Contains MatrixSSL™ security software license from PeerSec Networks Inc. http://www.peersec.com "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Microsoft, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox live, the Xbox logos, and the Xbox Live logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries. The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.

WORLDS COLLIDE

INTERPLANETARY SINGLE-PLAYER ADVENTURE ACROSS 12 CHAPTERS.

THREE EXPANSIVE WORLDS TEEMING WITH OVER 70 ENEMY SPECIES.

HUGE VARIETY OF ONLINE QUESTS FOR A PARTY OF UP TO SIX PLAYERS.

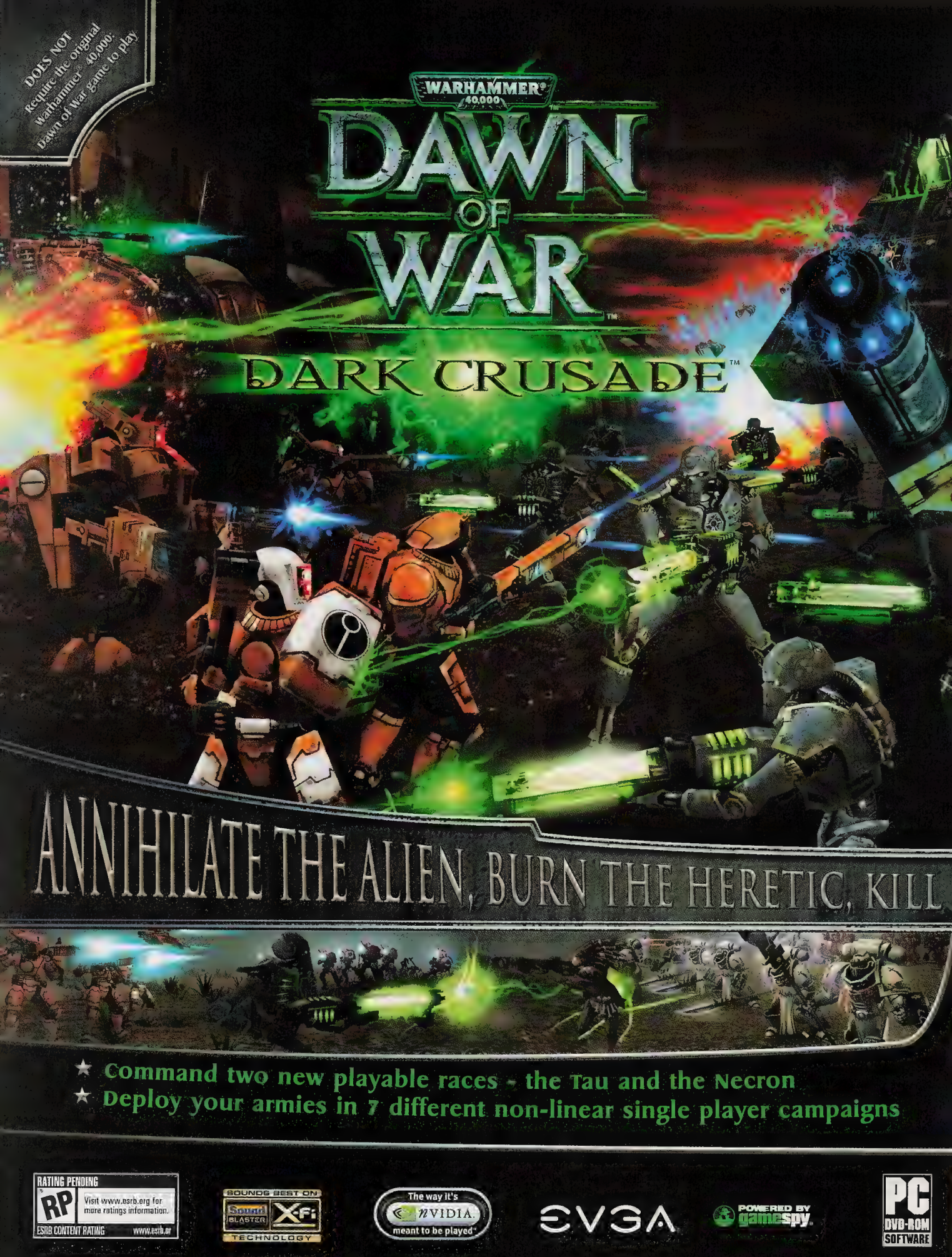
PRE-ORDER TODAY AT

WWW.PHANTASYSTARUNIVERSE.COM

OCTOBER 2006

SEGA

www.sega.com


DOES NOT
Require the original
Warhammer® 40,000:
Dawn of War game to play
WARHAMMER® 40,000
DAWN OF WAR™
DARK CRUSADE™
ANNIHILATE THE ALIEN, BURN THE HERETIC, KILL
★ Command two new playable races - the Tau and the Necron
★ Deploy your armies in 7 different non-linear single player campaigns
RATING PENDING
RP
Visit www.esrb.org for more ratings information.
ESRB CONTENT RATING
www.esrb.org
SOUNDS BEST ON
Sound BLASTER X-Fi
TECHNOLOGY
The way it's meant to be played
nVIDIA
EVGA
POWERED BY gamespy
PC
DVD-ROM
SOFTWARE

EXPANSION TO THE RTS GAME OF THE YEAR*

THE MUTANT: LET THE SLAUGHTER COMMENCE

★ Customize your heroes & armies and go online for endless hours of mayhem
★ Play Dark Crusade™ by itself and expand on the original Dawn of War!

WWW.DOW-DARKCRUSADE.COM

relic ENTERTAINMENT

Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War Dark Crusade – Copyright © Games Workshop Limited 2006. Dawn of War, Dawn of War: Dark Crusade, Games Workshop, Warhammer, the foregoing marks' respective logos, and all associated marks, logos, places, names, creatures, races and race insignia/devices/logos/symbols, vehicles, locations, weapons, units and unit insignia, characters, products, illustrations and images are either ®, TM and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2000-2006. Used under license. All Rights Reserved. GameSpy and the "Powered by GameSpy" design are trademarks of GameSpy Industries, Inc. All rights reserved. NVIDIA, the NVIDIA Logo, GeForce and "The Way It's Meant to be Played" Logo are registered trademarks and/or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation in the United States and other countries. THQ, Relic Entertainment and their respective logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of THQ Inc. All other trademarks, logos and copyrights are property of their respective owners.

THQ®
www.thq.com

A T-80 in the BK drive-thru

World in Conflict gives you a chance to protect fast food franchises everywhere BY MATTHEW GALLANT

Developer: Massive Entertainment Publisher: Sierra Release Date: Spring 2007

[left] Workers of the world, unite! And then seek shelter.
[above] They were like that when we got here, honest.

Massive Entertainment has a plan for developing the next *Battlefield* breakout—a detailed plan that even involves having the foresight to be from Sweden, just like *Battlefield* developers DICE. But Massive, with roots in the RTS genre thanks to the *Ground Control* series, isn't looking to be a clone; instead, it wants to find a new way to evoke that chaotic gaining-and-losing-territory style of team play. A close look at *World in Conflict* suggests that it's succeeding in meeting that goal.

Taking its cue from *Red Dawn*'s unique cocktail of commie paranoia and a complete disregard for the United States' intelligence and surveillance capabilities, the plot evokes the last gasp of the Soviet Union as a surprise large-scale amphibious invasion of Seattle. (This, instead of the stone-cold reality of perestroika and an epic boxing match with Sylvester Stallone.) The degree of "truthiness" in the backstory and the author's perceptions of the events depicted in *Rocky IV* aside, the crux of the situation is that a Mi-24 blows up a Burger King and some cops. Subsequent play involves the defense of America and the counterattack into Soviet territory.

If you wanted to ignore such details and sum up what this game is about in as few words as possible, it would be "a real-time strategy version of *Battlefield*." But from either side, that comparison is more one of convenience than aptness. True, the game is a team-vs.-team tug of war based on control points with an overhead view of the multiple units you control. But there is, for instance, no collection and management of resources, no building—the only thing RTS about the game is the means of controlling your squad. You start out with a number of points with which to purchase units, and the points continue to trickle in as the battle goes on. Your reinforcements get air-dropped at a point you can choose, as long as it's in the territory your side controls. From there, it's all tactical decision-making.

Your units come from a buffet of four roles: infantry, armor, air, and support (or, as the Queen of Battle Diehards would say, "Infantry and three kinds of infantry support"). You're not absolutely confined by

Big battles burn birches and blast byways.

that role; you can mix some infantry in with your tank column, but each role does have top-tier units unique to it. For example, only support players can field the heavy artillery that can range its shots nearly all the way across the map. But if you find yourself in a situation where you aren't currently fielding a true combined arms force and are caught short with your big guns about to get cut up by tanks or choppers, and you have no close teammates, you do have one other means of effecting victory.

As the round continues and you destroy enemy units and capture control points, you build up a tactical assistance budget that you can use to call in support: bombing runs, artillery barrages, napalm, and anti-air sorties. If you are patient and save up—and are willing to suspend disbelief as to why you'd be allowed to do this when you're on a map where you're the home team—you can even drop a tactical nuke, to great (but temporary) effect, both militarily and visually.

The game looks great, as the screenshots here indicate. Keep in mind that they're a somewhat embellished, though representative, peek at how the assets and the effects of the game look at this writing, at a solid frame-rate. This isn't going to be a game that will waste your high-end videocard. Even six or seven months from its release date, *World in Conflict* seems very close to done, and it's possible that, if it were released today, it could already be one of the "next big things." ■

The song "Bombs to the Clown" by the Dead Kennedys reference Red Dawn [and the equally awesome '80s classic, Iron Eagle]

"War is scary, war is fun.
Iron Eagle, Red Dawn,
Be a spectator, you'll rule the hill.
Just get cover guns and cheerios"

BLURB! Overlord

Developer Triumph Studios Publisher Codemasters Release Date 2007

It's Like: **Aesop on steroids**
The Buzz: **In a world where you find yourself in knee-deep puddles of rabid unicorn drool, where naked minions don chef's hats and pledge their lives to your service, you have two choices: 1) Rule with an iron hand, or 2) Rule with an iron fist. This bizarre-looking game from the creators of *Age of Wonders* looks a bit like *Dungeon Keeper* meets *Fable* meets *Pikmin*. You find yourself in the abandoned robes of a long-dead overlord, and, utilizing your army of minions, you must reclaim the land that Heroes saved. The game tracks your character's Corruption level based on the actions you perform, and your minions rejoice, thrive, or die at your will. Weirdness abounds, but product director Lennart Sas says, "We're going for funny and gross, not sick and grotesque."** –Cindy Yans

BLURB! Elveon

Developer 10Tacle Studios Publisher TBD Release Date Summer 2007

It's Like: **An Elf Help Book**
The Buzz: **"Elveon" means "The Book of Elves," and its namesake is an action-RPG from the folks who brought you the *GTR* series of racing simulations. A disconnect, perhaps, but nonetheless it's been in development since 2002 using the Unreal Engine 3.0. It seems that the world of Naon finds itself godless, as the descendants and future leaders were driven away by a malevolent force. You must liberate the city of Nimathar and make the world once again fit for divine habitation. Besides being among the few single-player RPGs that have recently emerged or are emerging, *Elveon* is characterized primarily by its combat system, which has four weapon classes, each with different tactical possibilities.** –CY

STRONGHOLD LEGENDS

BECOME A LEGEND

Stronghold Legends is a dramatic new RTS adventure set in the medieval world of Stronghold. Play as **King Arthur** and his Knights of the Round Table, **Count Vlad Dracul**, or the mighty **Siegfried** of Germany. Seize control of 3 vast kingdoms and become a legend.

26 missions over 3 unique campaigns all with advanced AI, give the best ever single player Stronghold experience

100% more siege equipment and castle traps - werewolf launchers, stake hurlers, tunnel systems, dragon harpoons

Brand new 4-player multiplayer features, including a challenging skirmish mode Deathmatch and 'King of the Hill'

TEEN
T
Alcohol Reference
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

the way it's meant to be played

COMING SOON!
www.strongholdlegends.com

POWERED BY gamespy

FIREFLY

2K

© 2006 FireFly Studios, Ltd. Stronghold Legends, FireFly Studios and the FireFly Studios logo are trademarks of FireFly Studios. 2K Games and the 2K Games logo, A Take2 Company logo, and Take-Two Interactive Software are all trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Take-Two Interactive Software. Developed by FireFly Studios. Published by 2K Games. All rights reserved. GameSpy and the "Powered by GameSpy" design are trademarks of GameSpy Industries, Inc. © 1999-2006 GameSpy Industries, Inc. All rights reserved. NVIDIA, the NVIDIA Logo, and other NVIDIA Marks are registered trademarks or trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation in the United States and other countries. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other marks and trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

Its aging game engine and graphics make it outdated compared with competitive new MMOs. But this will change quite a bit with the face-lift, collagen, and a touch of liposuction.

Ultima Online first launched in September 1997 and was the first MMO to reach a subscriber base of 100,000. Since then, it has added seven expansion packs and dozens of free content updates, and it is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest continuously running MMO in history.

Polishing Britannia

Ultima Online: Kingdom Reborn is sewing back on those tired old sequins

Origin Systems may be a distant memory, but Electronic Arts is certainly not abandoning *Ultima Online*, that still-isometric, well-traveled, well-worn elder of the MMO genre. In the beginning, the legendary kingdom of Britannia was what remained of the world of Sosaria after the evil Mondain was defeated by Lord British (in *Ultima IV* in 1985), and it remained the center of the *Ultima* series of games all the way through the launch of *UO* in 1997. Many believe that *UO* paved the way for all the MMOs to follow, as the first to tackle tradeskill balancing, player killing and griefing, urban sprawl, and many other issues that a number of its successors managed to learn from and avoid or fix.

After seven expansions and bunches of upgrades, next year *UO* will celebrate its 10th anniversary with *Ultima Online: Kingdom Reborn*. EA is bestowing upon it a well-earned gift—an entire makeover of the online world, with a new graphics engine and user interface, plus enough new content for even the most seasoned players. In addition, the nine years of content and features that came before will be preserved and updated.

EA Mythic, formerly Mythic Entertainment, developer of *Dark Age of Camelot*, is joining the *Ultima* team to help bring this project to fruition. They hope to end up with a full-featured expansion pack that has tons of new content and features, including a new playable race, quests, dungeons, revamped PvP combat, housing design that will not litter the landscape with unsightly sprawl, a new crafting model, and more. If you're currently playing *UO* and are completely stuck in your ways with an aversion to change, you can turn up your nose at the upgrade and play it the way you always have (you relic).

The team is redrawing more than 9,000 pieces of art, which should provide the whole world—some 14 million tiles—with a brand-new look and feel. Even Lord British will find it tough to scoff. Maybe… after all, he has a few Tabulae up his Rasa. **–Cindy Yans**

BLURB! PrisonServer: The Online Prison

Developer/Publisher Serving Online Worlds **Release Date** Fall 2006

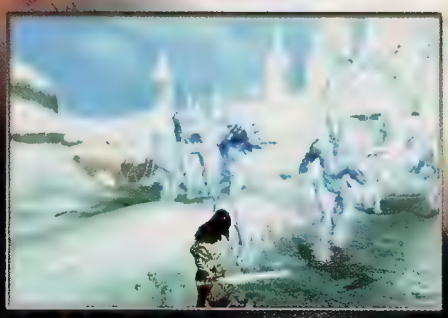
It's Like: **The Lord of Alcatraz**

The Buzz: **Survive prison life while gaining respect, collaborating, fighting, and creating your own gangs and ranks in this MMO. It comes in both PvP and non-PvP flavors. While you won't find drug or alcohol references, you will find violence ("There are graphic and depictions of torture, mutilation and sadism in form of game items and quests [sic]"); sex ("There are graphic and depictions of nudity and depictions of sexual situations… found on quests, NPC conversations, and some light nudity on player characters [sick]"); something they're calling "Sensitivity" ("There is sacrilege …in form of peculiar priests and vergers with an odd sense of faith and curious motivations [Sikh]"); and content that may be inappropriate for children. In any case, if you drop the soap in the shower, you're on your own. –CY**

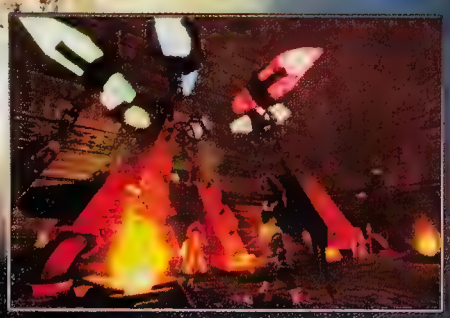
FIVE HEROES, ONE FATE, INFINITE ADVENTURE

MAGE KNIGHT APOCALYPSE

FULLY EXPLORE A WORLD BEYOND IMAGINATION WITH DYNAMIC SCALING FOR NEVER ENDING CHALLENGES.



ADAPTIVE SKILL SYSTEM ALLOWS YOUR CHARACTER TO BECOME AN EXTENSION OF YOUR PLAY STYLE.



THOUSANDS OF UNIQUE ITEMS PROVIDE LIMITLESS CUSTOMIZATION OPTIONS.

COMING FALL 2006

TEEN
T
Blood
Partial Nudity
Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

SOUNDS BEST ON Sound BLASTER X-Fi TECHNOLOGY

CREATIVE EAX ADVANCED HD

The way it's meant to be played NVIDIA

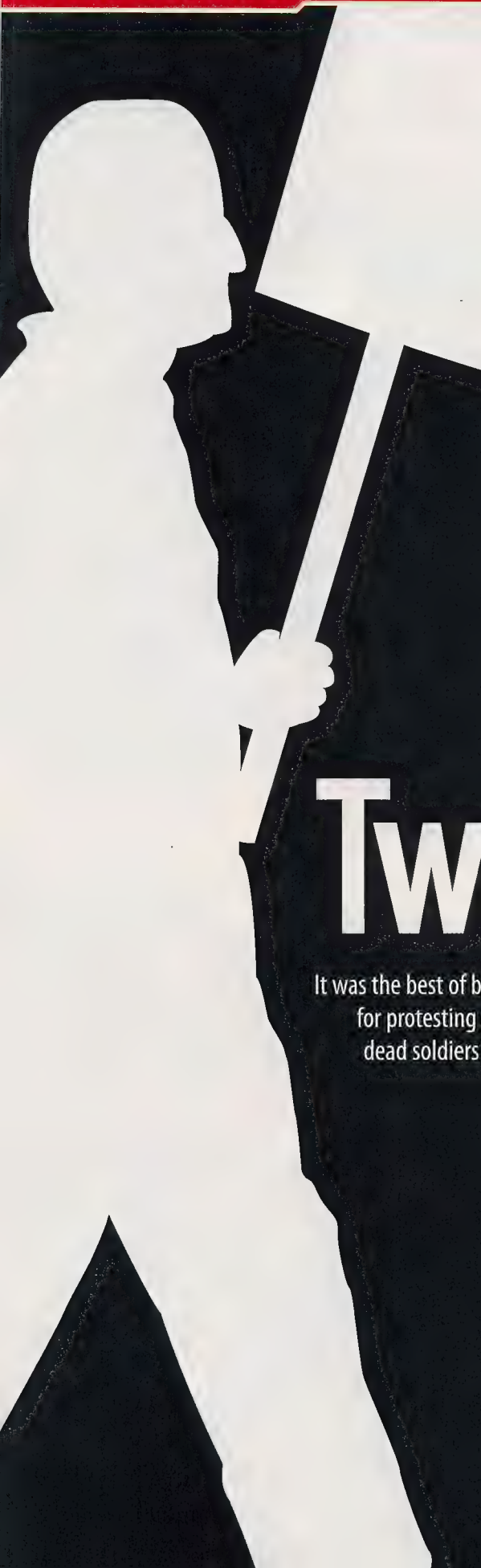
POWERED BY gamespy

WIZKIDS™

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

BANDAI NAMCO Games

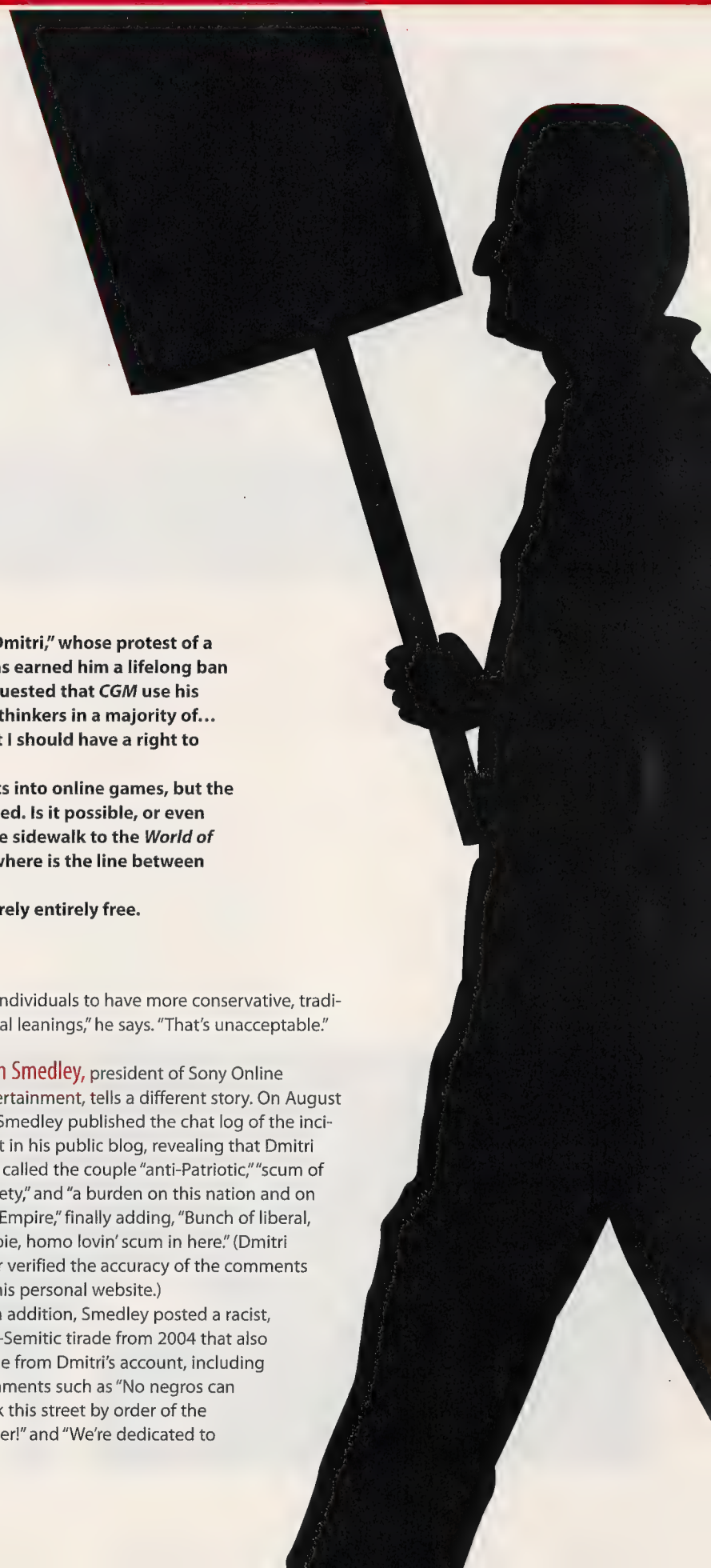
Mage Knight™: Apocalypse & ©2006 WizKids, Inc. Mage Knight is a trademark and/or registered trademark of WizKids, Inc. in the United States and/or other countries. All rights reserved. Licensed in conjunction with Fog Studios, Inc. Licensed exclusively to NAMCO BANDAI Games America, Inc. Software Platform Logo (™ and ©) IEMA 2006. NVIDIA, the NVIDIA logo, and The way it's meant to be played are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of NVIDIA Corporation. GameSpy and the "Powered by GameSpy" design are trademarks of GameSpy Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. The ESRB rating icons are registered trademarks of the Entertainment Software Association. ® 2006 Creative Technology Ltd. The Creative logo, Sound Blaster logo, X-Fi logo, EAX logo, EAX ADVANCED HD logo are registered trademarks of Creative Technology Ltd, in United States and/or other countries. All brands or product names listed are trademarks or registered trademarks and are property of their respective holders.



A Tale of Two Protests

It was the best of bans; it was the worst of bans. One player gets kicked out of Star Wars Galaxies for protesting gay marriage; another is booted from America's Army for typing the names of dead soldiers in chat. The next round of the First Amendment game starts... right... now.

BY LARA CRIGGER



"I'm kind of like the sheep in the lion's den," says "Dmitri," whose protest of a same-sex marriage event in *Star Wars Galaxies* has earned him a lifelong ban from the game. (For anonymity's sake, he has requested that *CGM* use his middle name only.) "I'm one of the only conservative thinkers in a majority of... well, let's just say more liberal folks," he explains. "But I should have a right to freedom of speech, too."

Dmitri is far from alone in taking his real-life politics into online games, but the boundaries of Internet discourse are still poorly defined. Is it possible, or even desirable, to transfer First Amendment rights from the sidewalk to the *World of WarCraft* Guild Hall? What are our online rights, and where is the line between sharing one's opinion and trolling?

After all, even in the offline world, free speech is rarely entirely free.

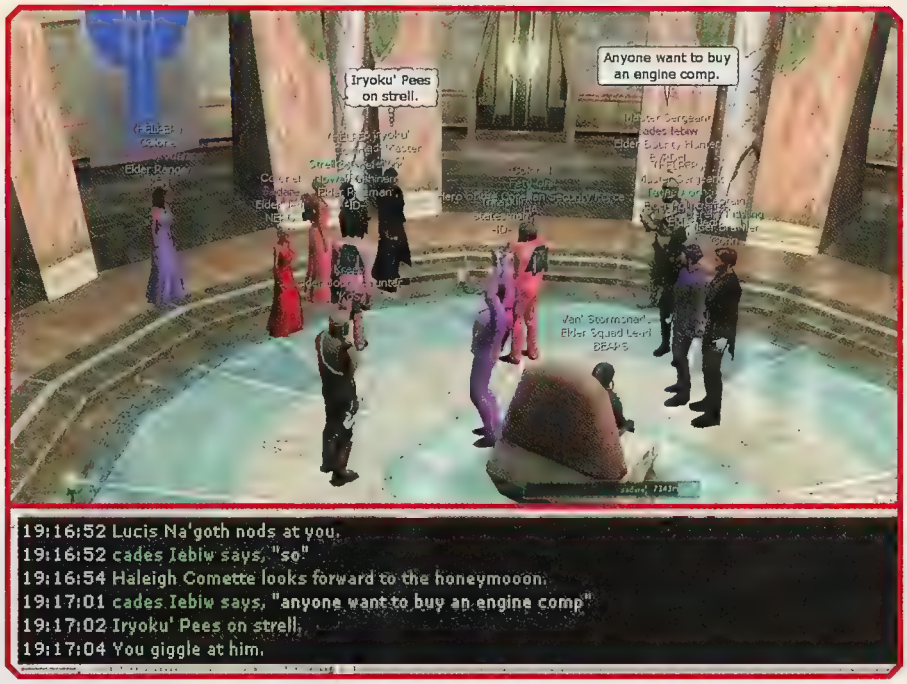
On August 5, Dmitri ran afoul of *Star Wars Galaxies* admins when his character, Strell Samodelkin, staged a protest at the in-game wedding of two female characters. Dmitri, along with a few other players, gave speeches denouncing the event and, according to one report, fired on the couple. He was subsequently banned from the game, and, in accordance with the game's Rules of Conduct, the rest of his accounts were permanently terminated as well.

Sony producer Jake Neri argues that the incident was a clear case of player harassment. "The rules and policies were violated," says Neri. "It's as simple as that."

But Dmitri insists that his rhetoric was relatively mild. "I didn't actually call anyone a 'fag' or anything like that," he says. Instead, he blames his banning on institutionalized liberal bias within Sony Online Entertainment. "They have no room for individuals to have more conservative, traditional leanings," he says. "That's unacceptable."

John Smedley, president of Sony Online Entertainment, tells a different story. On August 14, Smedley published the chat log of the incident in his public blog, revealing that Dmitri had called the couple "anti-Patriotic," "scum of society," and "a burden on this nation and on the Empire," finally adding, "Bunch of liberal, hippie, homo lovin' scum in here." (Dmitri later verified the accuracy of the comments on his personal website.)

In addition, Smedley posted a racist, anti-Semitic tirade from 2004 that also came from Dmitri's account, including comments such as "No negros can walk this street by order of the furher!" and "We're dedicated to


Iryoku' Pees on strell.
Anyone want to buy an engine comp.
19:16:52 Lucis Na'goth nods at you.
19:16:52 cades Iebiw says, "so"
19:16:54 Haleigh Comette looks forward to the honeymooon.
19:17:01 cades Iebiw says, "anyone want to buy an engine comp"
19:17:02 Iryoku' Pees on strell.
19:17:04 You giggle at him.

"I didn't actually call anyone a 'fag' or anything like that. They have no room for individuals to have more conservative, traditional leanings,"
–Dmitri

sending jedi to the gas chamber! Send a tell!" For his part, Dmitri swears that a friend had logged into his account and made those comments. The post does not clarify why mods refrained from permanently banning Dmitri two years ago.

As of press time, requests to Smedley's office for interviews had not been answered. However, in his blog, the SOE president rejects Dmitri's accusations of free speech violations, writing, "This kind of speech can be free in someone else's games… because it's not okay in ours."

As for the charge of liberal bias, producer Julio Torres laughs it off. "The customer reps can have any bias they want," he says. "It's irrelevant to us. What matters is that they understand that any decision they make should be based on the backbone of the Rules of Conduct."

The liberals are striking back, too. On the other end of the political spectrum is Joseph DeLappe, a media artist and professor at the University of Nevada. He runs the "dead in iraq" project. DeLappe's protest is simple: He signs onto *America's Army* and types in the names of U.S. soldiers who have fallen in the war in Iraq, as well as their ages, branches of service, and dates of death. He enters names into the game's messaging system until he is shot or kicked from the server, both of which happen frequently. In fact, five months after the start of his project, he has only made it halfway through the list of U.S. casualties.

Some call it trolling, but DeLappe stands by his political statement. "The project is essentially an online memorial and protest," he says. "By inputting those names into [*America's Army*], it's a way to connect a very harsh and difficult reality with what is fantasy."

On his website, DeLappe has posted screenshots of some of the more colorful responses to his efforts. The pictures show fellow players reacting with every emotion from curiosity to anger, and a few illustrate the multiple instances of DeLappe's being

What Is a Public Forum, Anyway?

The First Amendment right to free speech typically applies to public—not private—discussion held in forums, or government property open to the expression of ideas. Forums can be either public or nonpublic.

Public or open forums are available for anyone to express ideas of any nature. A traditional public forum is a place that has long been associated with free speech, such as street corners, sidewalks, and parks. Limited public forums, by contrast, are places like city halls and municipal meeting rooms that the government has purposely set aside for expression, meaning that the government can also restrict what's said or who says it.

Nonpublic forums are public property, such as county jails or public schools, which the government has not opened up as a public forum. In general, limited public forums can be changed to nonpublic forums, but traditional public forums cannot.

As if this weren't confusing enough, the Internet raises even more questions about what constitutes a public forum. Does a chatroom count? A blog? An MMO? Only time—and court battles—will tell for sure.

warned by mods with a stern "Be courteous and no foul language."

Publicly, however, the Army has remained mostly mum about DeLappe's efforts. "Unless an individual uses foul or insensitive language, or is otherwise ruining gameplay for others," says Paul Boyce, Public Affairs Specialist for the Army, "the management of *America's Army* takes no action." The Army, Boyce implies, is simply unconcerned by the protest.

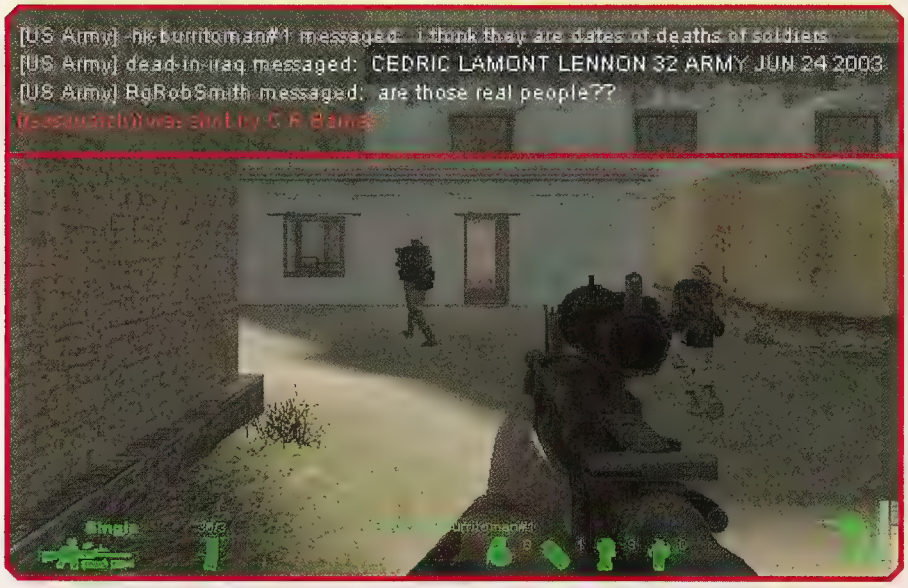
Although "dead in iraq" hasn't gotten many positive reactions within *America's Army* itself, DeLappe takes pride in the intense blogosphere discussion about his project. "It's an idea that's caught a lot of people's attention," he says, "and that's really the point."

Both Dmitri and DeLappe are adamant that their protests fall within the definition of free speech and therefore should be protected by their First Amendment rights. But this assertion assumes that constitutional guarantees carry over into virtual worlds, which isn't necessarily the case.

Since most online games are proprietary, American law does not define them as public forums. Therefore, players are not always granted the same free speech protections that they have elsewhere. Before each session of *Star Wars Galaxies*, players must accept the Terms of Service, which include rules prohibiting harassment, defamation, and abusive or obscene speech. "I have a lot of people paying money every month for this game, and they're not paying for hate-mongering," says Neri. Besides, he adds, even in real-life public places, there are boundaries: You can't scream "fire" in a crowded theater, for instance, or proselytize in a shopping mall.

Still, the right to free speech is so ingrained in the American psyche that people assume it extends to virtual realms as well. "It's just another social environment," says Dmitri. "It's just the same as walking around anywhere else." The Internet has always been associated with the uninhibited exchange and expression of ideas. Many, if not most, players feel entitled to freely express their opinions in virtual debates.

Regardless of the rules regulating free speech, DeLappe thinks we're certain to see more virtual protests in the future. After all, as we live more and more of our lives online, he says, virtual interaction through forums, blogs, and games often supplants face-to-face conversation. That applies to political debate as well. "I think it's completely appropriate," says DeLappe. "As a citizen, you don't check your conscience at the door when you go online." ■



Josephe DeLappe has generated intense blogosphere discussion with his "dead in iraq" project.

SHOTS COURTESY DELAPPE 2006

Great Moments in Virtual Protests

Servin vs. SimCopter

In 1996, Maxis employee Jacques Servin became incensed when he was told to code scantily clad women into the game *SimCopter*. In retaliation, he inserted male sprites in swimsuits kissing each other instead. Caught soon after the game's release, the naughty Easter egg was cut from future editions, and Servin was fired.

Andrews vs. Blizzard

After starting a GLBT-friendly guild in *World of WarCraft*, 25-year-old Sara Andrews was cited for sexually explicit harassment and threatened with permanent banning. Her story went public, and thousands of angry gamers took up her cause. The hailstorm of player complaints convinced Blizzard to rewrite its Terms of Service and issue Andrews a public apology.

China vs. Japan

Disgruntled by mod crackdown on anti-Japanese political sentiments in the game *Fantasy Westward Journey*, tens of thousands of Chinese gamers began protest marches and demonstrations in-game. Some say the protests, which started on July 7 (the anniversary of the start of World War II in the Pacific Theater), are the largest in-game demonstration ever; on one server, about 80,000 protesters joined in one day.

Fragdolls vs. Beauty Queens

Along with female-gamer clan PMS, Ubisoft's Fragdolls have protested this year's Miss World Series Video Games beauty contest. The group of women gamers, known for their sexiness, complained that the contest judges contestants solely on beauty without factoring in gaming credentials.

The Death of Paper

The ultimate tabletop gaming convention says, "Out with the old, in with the new," as it becomes more and more about videogames BY RICK MOSCATELLO

GenCon has always been the ultimate convention for tabletop gaming. But each year, its electronic corner has expanded, especially when the game companies snag a license that ties-in well with "traditional" gaming.

For decades, the biggest game at GenCon was *Dungeons & Dragons*. It's fitting, then, that at least two licensed and digital electronic titles showed up this year. *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach* already displayed much of the facelift it'll receive this fall (see page 53). *D&D Tactics* will not only be the first *D&D* game for the PSP, it will also be the first with serious psionics rules, including two different classes based on these powers. The turn-based play is set in a unique world (as opposed to one of the many D20 system worlds) and will even allow for competition against other players.

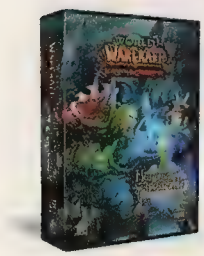
Games Workshop's *Warhammer* never achieved the same level of popularity as *D&D*, but that hasn't stopped publishers from signing it up for multiple games this fall and beyond. EA-Mythic was still on hand to show off *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*. This 2007 MMO is built around PvP combat right from the get-go. Planned engagements include skirmishes, battlefields (for control of resources, with prizes for the characters), instanced scenarios (with non-player characters to balance out the forces), and a major campaign game to capture opposing capital cities. They're still working on balancing the Dwarfs and Greenskins, which have classes like Engineer and Squig Herder, respectively.

Just as tabletop games spawn electronic ones, so the reverse happens. CCP, developer of *EVE Online*, created its own collectible card game, *EVE: The Second Genesis*. Although the competitive TCG market is such that most games simply get ignored, the power of a good license made the difference here. The *EVE* booth was packed with players, along with a line of hopefuls awaiting their chance to get a demonstration (and free starter deck).

Watching the attendees remains a highlight of the show.

As always, *World of WarCraft* drew an enormous crowd, as Blizzard announced a reduction in the level cap for raids. The *WoW* boardgame sold so well in its release last year that an expansion was inevitable. *Shadow of War* from Fantasy Flight Games adds several hundred new cards to draw, with new items for characters and ten new talents and powers for each class deck.

Speaking of decks, Upper Deck Entertainment unveiled its new *World of WarCraft* trading card game, where each player takes the role of a hero with its own class, faction, talents, race, and profession. As in the MMO, these traits help determine your play style and how you plan to crush the competition. The game includes "raid decks," which mirror the group raid experience where you can take down Onyxia and friends.



Leeroy Jenkins
Ally — Human Paladin
When Leeroy Jenkins enters play, exhaust all other allies in your party. They can't ready during your next ready step.
Say "Leeeeroooy Jenkins!" → Leeroy has ferocity this turn.

Book-and-movie-inspired *Eragon* appeared in full regalia, as Stormfront Studios demoed its combo and magic-based combat system with finishing moves, multiple grapples, and counterattacks. One of its standout features is the capability to have a second player jump in and out in a supporting role. Since different characters have an assortment of abilities, this should add a lot of variety to the game—and dragon flight–based combat is very… ambitious.

Despite the change in focus for the show, the attendees remain one of its biggest highlights. People still dressed up in their favorite fantasy wear, making watching them into a show within the show. ■

NEWSBYTES

Civilization Derails Book—Award-winning author Iain Banks told the Independent Online Edition that the delay in the release of his next book, *Matter*, was caused by "Civilisation" (as those wacky Brits like to call *Sid Meier's Civilization*). "I played it for three months and then realized I hadn't done any work," he told the paper. "In the end, I had to delete all the saved files and smash the CD. It is very unprofessional of me. I had to ask for an extension for the first time, which made me feel just like I was a student again...."

F.E.A.R. Now F.R.E.E.—Sierra has made the multiplayer portion of Monolith's *F.E.A.R.* available for free. Dubbed *F.E.A.R. Combat*, all you need to do to get your game on is to grab it from your favorite download site and register at joinfear.com. The game includes 10 multiplayer game modes, 19 maps, 12 weapons, and full Punkbuster support....

Star Trek Game Now With 500% More Trekkiness—Bethesda announced that its upcoming *Star Trek Legacy* strategy game will feature a script from noted *Trek* scribe D.C. Fontana. In other news, William Shatner, Patrick Stewart, Avery Brooks, Kate Mulgrew, and Scott Bakula will provide voiceovers for the game....

NEWSBYTES

Valve Delays Game; World Not Really Shocked—In a move that came as a complete shock to exactly three people, Valve announced that *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* has slipped to 2007. It will still include the revamped *Team Fortress 2*, plus *Portal*, a clever-looking puzzle game using, er, portals....

Penny Arcade Officially Overexposed—First it's a comic, then it's a convention. Now it's a videogame. The webcomic *Penny Arcade* is getting into game development, with its principals collaborating with Hothead Games on *Penny Arcade Adventures: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness*. It will be an episodic game, available via digital download.

Videogame Industry Wins Your Tax Dollars Back—Judge Matthew F. Kennelly ruled that the State of Illinois must pay the Entertainment Software Association over $500,000 in attorney's fees for its unconstitutional effort to enact a law banning the sale of violent videogames. The state is appealing the verdict. In his decision, every gamer's favorite judge wrote, "If controlling access to allegedly 'dangerous' speech is important in promoting the positive psychological development of children, in our society that role is properly accorded to parents and families, not the State...."

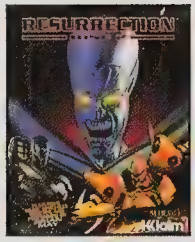
Six Unnecessary Sequels

Even though the press always presents them as BIG HUGE ANNOUNCEMENTS, sequels are inevitable. It would be bigger news if a game didn't have a sequel. But some games get sequels that make you scratch you head and say, "Why?" They're the gaming equivalent of *Garfield 2*. So here are some of the most unnecessary sequels, PC edition.

Black & White 2 Everyone agrees that *Black & White* had a great concept but wasn't a particularly great implementation of said concept. It sold a lot of copies, so it spawned a sequel that took out the original's unique elements—many of which didn't work, but whatever—and turned it into a generic real-time strategy game. Yay for progress.

Mortyr 2 Did the first leave too many questions unanswered? Were multiple levels of suck not enough? Sure, the sequel was better, but that's like saying you'd rather die in your sleep than from a gunshot wound to the stomach.

Outpost 2: Divided Destiny This is a fine game and all, but why did they associate it with one of the all-time disasters? The original was like a thesis on how to build a space colony, developed by NASA for science wonks, only it was impossible to play and incomplete. The sequel was a fairly standard real-time strategy game set in space. Bizarre.



Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh The original was mostly famous for taking forever to make, costing a fortune, and featuring nudity and a rape scene. The sequel opened with a puzzle that involved using your pet rat and a granola bar to get your keys from behind a couch. (Moving it apparently wasn't an option.)

Resurrection: Rise 2 *Rise of the Robots* is widely considered one of the worst fighting games ever made, with bad controls and in-game visuals that didn't quite match the screenshots. But man, did those rendered robots look cool. The sequel? It still sucked.

True Crime: New York City It was an interesting idea. Make a *Grand Theft Auto* clone, using the same basic formula—lots of famous actors, a licensed soundtrack, cussing, violence, etc.—but set it in real cities. The problem? Real cities are boring. And, while the original featured terrible controls, the sequel managed to make them worse.

QUOTABLES

XBOX LIVE

"Every time we go down a path, we look behind and [Microsoft is] right there—we just can't shake these guys. I wish that they would come up with some strategies of their own."
–Kaz Hirai, executive vice president of Sony Computer Entertainment

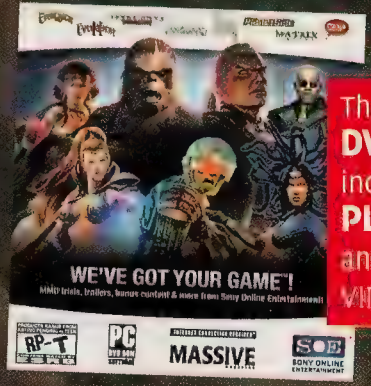
"I have realized I've got the PR equivalent of Tourette's. I can't help myself. It's the inability to downplay stuff... I have to get excited!"
–Peter Molyneux on his tendency to hype his own games, in an interview with Eurogamer.net

INTRODUCING YOUR SOURCE FOR MMOS

FREE DEMO DVD + GODS & HEROES VIP BETA KEY
MASSIVE
MAGAZINE
What's next for the
MMOs
of TODAY and
TOMORROW
Inside World of WarCraft Burning Crusade
PLUS:
The best quest in EverQuest II
The craziest parts of Final Fantasy XI
Why you're still playing The Sims Online
[OMFG] WTF are they saying in chat?
[ ] Crawling out of the MUDs

Available now

Find out what's next for the **MMOs OF TODAY AND TOMORROW**, why you'd want to hire a **CHINESE GOLD FARMER**, how Sony almost **LOST MILLIONS OF TOONS**, and more in the debut issue of **MASSIVE** Magazine.



The newsstand edition includes a **FREE DVD** with **FIVE** playable trial versions, including **EVERQUEST II**, **EVERQUEST**, **PLANETSIDE**, **STAR WARS GALAXIES**, and **THE MATRIX ONLINE**, plus a free VIP code to the beta of **GODS & HEROES**.

MASSIVE
MAGAZINE

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

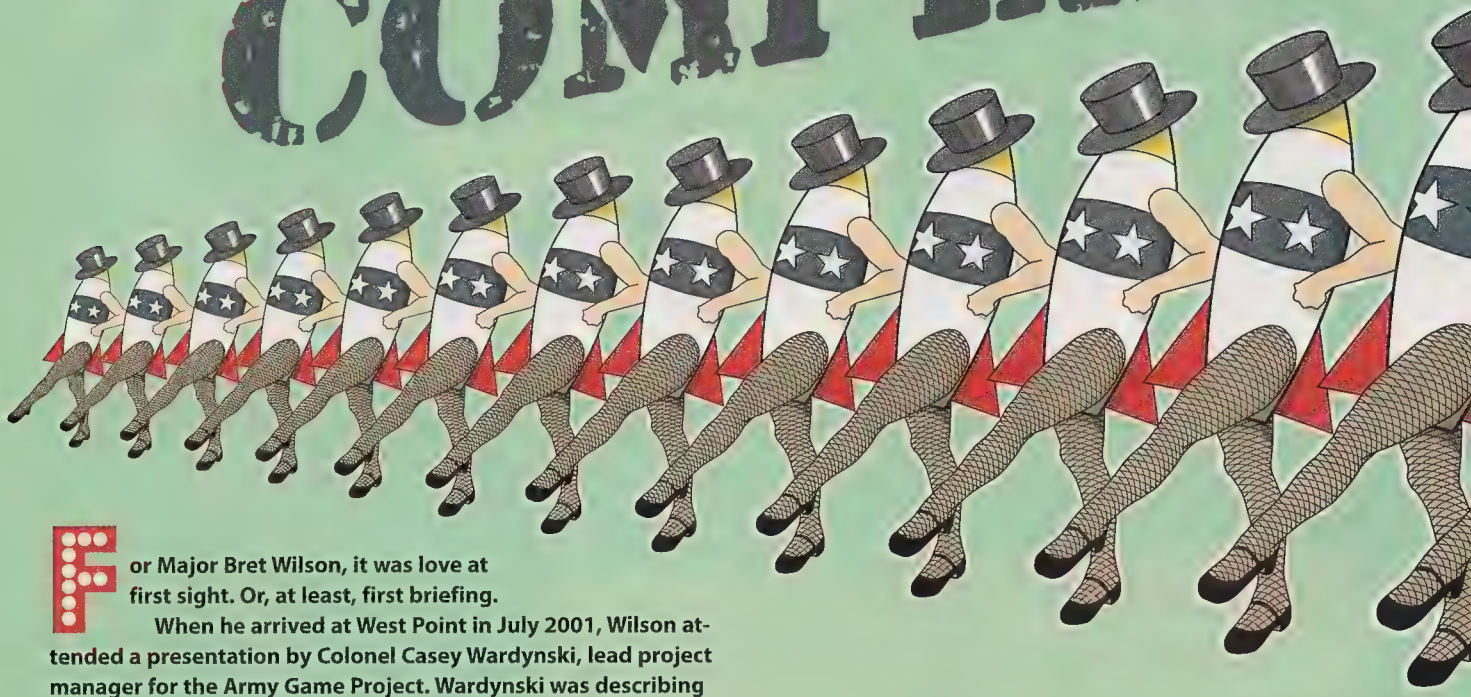
4 Digital Issues for $10.99

4 Print Issues for $12.99*

*(may include bonus DVD with select issues, available in US only)

massive-magazine.com/subscribe

THE MILITARY ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX



For Major Bret Wilson, it was love at first sight. Or, at least, first briefing.

When he arrived at West Point in July 2001, Wilson attended a presentation by Colonel Casey Wardynski, lead project manager for the Army Game Project. Wardynski was describing the progress of his latest effort, *America's Army*. As a lifelong gamer, Wilson was stunned. "I remember thinking, 'This is amazing! This is what I'd always dreamed of doing,'" he says. "And there I was, literally at its genesis." After the presentation, Wilson immediately signed on for the project; he would eventually become the chief technology officer for *America's Army*.

Like Wilson, the military has always had a love affair with videogames. In fact, the first videogame, created in 1947, was little more than a Cold War–era missile simulation. But in the years since 9/11, military-themed electronica has boomed in popularity, prompting some to warn against an emerging "military-entertainment complex."

The issue isn't so black and white. "Games and war tend to be talked about in polarizing terms," says Ed Halter, author of the book *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games*. "Games are either good for you or bad for you; people are 'anti-war' or 'pro-war.' Reality is more complicated than that."

Take Kuma\War. Developed by Kuma Reality Games, this tactical first- and third-person shooter has two distinguishing characteristics: It's released in installments, with new episodes every few weeks, and its missions recreate current events. Very current events. For example, less than a month after Iraqi Al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. air raid, *Kuma\War* introduced a mission where you could assassinate the notorious terrorist yourself.

Is that tasteless? Maybe. But, according to Kuma Reality Games CEO Keith Halper, people like the game because of its relevance. "They see stories on the news, and then they're able to go into the game and experience it for themselves," he says. According to Halper, *Kuma\War* is like an online interactive news channel; the game's slogan is even "TV for a Generation Raised on Games!"

While *Kuma\War* has received its fair share of negative press, Halper says the reactions from returning Iraq War veterans tend to be more positive. "They send us their stories," he says. "They'll often

War, huh, good God, y'all. What is it good for? Videogames, say it again. Welcome to the next level of realism and fun. Let the controversy begin.

BY LARA CRIGGER

come to us to make sure their unit is recognized." Even more revealing is that *Kuma\War* also has a substantial Arabic audience, and players hail from Egypt, Iraq, and even Iran.

That's not to say that *Kuma\War* is without controversy. "Assault on Iran," a speculative mission in which players disable Tehran's nuclear capabilities, caused such an uproar in Iran. The ultra-conservative Kayhan Daily condemned the game in an editorial. Soon after, the Union of Islamic Student Societies announced that it had created its own version of "Assault on Iran," this time from the Iranian perspective. In response, Kuma began development of a third installment in the story. What has emerged is a unique digital dialogue: a political debate through videogames.

Some games have been used for both commercial and military applications. Zipper Interactive collaborates with the Naval Special Warfare Command to design the *SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals* series. The Navy uses a modded version of *Microsoft Flight Simulator* in training. Spectrum Holobyte's *Falcon 4.0* was revamped for F-15 pilots. Even Ubisoft got into the action, partnering with the Army to adapt *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear* for urban combat training.

But the best-known example is Pandemic Studios' *Full Spectrum*

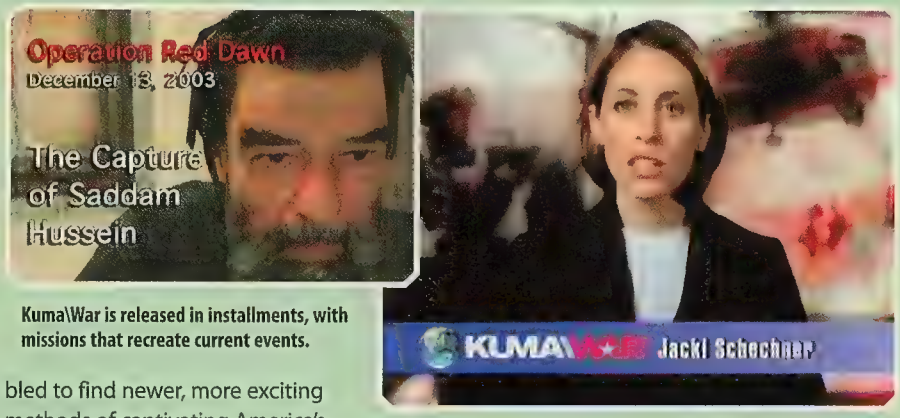
Warrior. It originated as an infantry simulation for the Army; in the game, the player directs two squadrons, Alpha and Bravo, through vaguely Middle Eastern urban terrain. "[The game] was created to teach squad leaders how to command," says the FAQ page on Pandemic's website. *Full Spectrum Warrior* quickly became a critical and commercial darling, winning dozens of awards and selling millions of copies worldwide.

Shortly after its release, however, the game experienced a backlash from some of the Army's training officers. Accusations flew that Pandemic had been overly focused on creating a successful commercial release and had consequently neglected the Army's version. The game's urban combat was too unrealistic, officers complained, and certain features, such as cover and enemy positioning, were poorly implemented. "Some critics thought it was too entertaining," adds Halter, "and not accurate enough."

In an interesting footnote, one of the game's art directors, Andrew Paquette, brought similar concerns to his managers six months before release. He claims that after he complained, he was fired. Paquette sued Sony for wrongful termination, but a federal judge dismissed his case.

If other games flirt with military themes, *America's Army* is an unabashed love letter to the art of war. Released on July 4, 2002, this online shooter depicts everything from Basic Rifle Marksmanship training to combat deployment in the global war on terror. In the last four years, over seven million people have registered to play.

The project started in the late '90s. Faced with flat recruitment levels, the Army scrambled to find newer, more exciting methods of captivating America's youth. Videogames seemed like the ideal solution, since their player base overlapped the Army's target demographic of 13- to 24-year-old males. "The concept was to use game technology as a platform for 'strategic communication' with young Americans," says Wilson. So, when Wardynski approached his superiors in 1999 with the idea for *America's Army*, production began immediately.



Kuma\War is released in installments, with missions that recreate current events.

"In terms of recruiting, [the game] really turns the traditional paradigm on its head," says Wilson. Indeed, *America's Army* often places players in the odd position of recruiting themselves. Gamers who become curious about mission specifics or military life are encouraged to ask questions of the active-duty soldiers who also play the game (identified by gold stars on their uniforms). "It's a conversation starter," says Wilson. "We put information about the Army squarely into the hands of the player."

Some critics have taken issue with the game for its violence. Wilson vehemently disagrees. "There's no dismemberment," he argues. "There's no gore." He also mentions that almost half the missions aren't combat-oriented, and that there are parental controls in place to turn off blood and prohibit advanced marksmanship training. "[The Army's] mission is to employ force or managed violence subject to the rules of war. We incorporate that into the larger story of soldiering. That's what we communicate in the game, and that's not a violent story by any means."

It's bizarre to think of a nonviolent military game, but the disconnect may be the secret of the military-entertainment complex. Military games reel players in with violence and give glamour to a lifestyle that is, ironically, not all that violent. After all, none of these games illustrate the less flashy aspects of military life: nuanced diplomacy, civilian casualties, bureaucracy, and endless waiting. Realism in war games extends only as far as the gun.

But for mass entertainment, maybe that's OK. "These games feed our desire to know: What is it like to go to war? What is it like to kill?" says Halter. "And at the same time, the games are reassuring because, in the end, it's only a game." ■

IT'S HARD OUT HERE FOR A TERRORIST

At hearings before a Congressional intelligence committee last May, Pentagon officials screened footage from *Battlefield 2*, which they claimed was direct evidence that Al-Qaeda is modding our videogames to indoctrinate Arabic youth. The video, featuring Islamic insurgents clearly attacking American troops, shocked the committee. Particularly haunting was the cold voiceover: "I was just a boy when the infidels came to my village. ..."

When news of the video leaked to the press, gamers quickly noted that the footage was not, in fact, from a modded version of *Battlefield 2* but was actually regular in-game action from the expansion pack *Special Forces*. Making it even more surreal, the voiceover was a monologue from 2004's satirical puppet comedy *Team America: World Police*. Clearly, the video was a joke. The Pentagon still claimed it was being used as a propaganda tool.

So, is the government as out of touch as it seems? Apparently not. Terrorists do use videogames for training, propaganda, and recruitment purposes. For example, Hezbollah's *Special Force* portrays the Islamic resistance to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. There's also the Syrian-made *Under Ash* and its sequel *Under Siege*, both of which feature Palestinians waging the Second Intifada against Israel.

While the Pentagon was justified in having suspicions about the *Battlefield 2* video, maybe next time they'll pass it by a gamer first.

Fill Out a Survey, Win an iPod Nano

Tell Us Something About You

How old are you?
- ○ Under 18
- ○ 18–24
- ○ 25–35
- ○ 36–50
- ○ Over 50
- ○ Prefer not to say

What is your gender?
- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Prefer not to say

What is the highest level of education you've completed?
- ○ High school
- ○ Some college
- ○ College degree
- ○ Some post-graduate work
- ○ Masters/Doctorate/Law degree

Gaming Habits

How many computer or console games have you purchased in the last year?
- ○ 0–5
- ○ 6–10
- ○ More than 10

How many MMOs are you currently playing?
- ○ 0
- ○ 1–3
- ○ More than 3

How did you obtain this issue of Computer Games Magazine?
- ○ Purchased at newsstand
- ○ Digital Purchase
- ○ Subscription
- ○ Other

Why did you purchase this issue of Computer Games Magazine?
- ○ I'll read anything and everything about computer games.
- ○ The cover and contents seemed interesting.
- ○ A friend recommended it to me.
- ○ The reputation of the editorial staff was enough.

Are you currently a subscriber to MASSIVE Magazine?
- ○ Yes
- ○ No

We need your help. We'd like to know more about you, and what you think about *Computer Games Magazine*. Your answers will help us help you. So, please take a few minutes of your time to complete the questionnaire.

As a token of our appreciation, everyone who sends in a completed survey or fills it out online will be automatically entered into a random drawing to win a free iPod Nano.

Review Computer Games Magazine

How would you rate this issue?

○ ★★★★★ ○ ★★★★ ○ ★★★ ○ ★★ ○ ★

This issue of *Computer Games Magazine* represents a good value.

○ AGREE STRONGLY ○ ○ ○ ○ DISAGREE STRONGLY

I want to subscribe to *Computer Games Magazine*, or purchase another issue.

○ AGREE STRONGLY ○ ○ ○ ○ DISAGREE STRONGLY

How would you rate these articles/sections?

	LOVED IT				DIDN'T LIKE IT/ DIDN'T READ IT
Incoming	○	○	○	○	○
Tale of Two Protests	○	○	○	○	○
The Military-Entertainment Complex	○	○	○	○	○
There and Hack Again	○	○	○	○	○
Touched by Other Minds	○	○	○	○	○
D.I.Y. PC 101	○	○	○	○	○
Reviews	○	○	○	○	○
Mods & Ends	○	○	○	○	○
Board Game Features	○	○	○	○	○
Columns	○	○	○	○	○

How interested are you in articles on any of the following topics?

	VERY INTERESTED	SOMEWHAT INTERESTED	NOT INTERESTED
Reviews of current games	○	○	○
Features on gaming culture	○	○	○
Profiles of game designers	○	○	○
Previews of upcoming games	○	○	○
Tips and strategies	○	○	○
News about the industry	○	○	○
Profiles of top game players	○	○	○
Board game and P&P RPG coverage	○	○	○

Win an iPod Nano

We'd prefer it if you'd fill out this survey online at the following URL: **cgonline.com/survey191**

You can also fax your answers to **(802) 434–6493**

If you'd rather mail the survey in, please send it to:
Computer Games Magazine
65 Millet St., Suite 203
Richmond, VT 05477

In order to receive your prize, you must provide a valid e-mail address. Your survey answers and your e-mail address won't be linked together, but be warned: We may e-mail you from time to time with special offers.

Computer Games
MAGAZINE

There and Hack Again

Is giving Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar a good dose of PvP like trying to force a Balrog through the eye of a needle? Turbine will find out next year.

BY CINDY YANS

Whether you were weaned on it or were just spattered with its Peter Jackson–esque fallout several years ago, a small sliver of Middle-earth runs through your head and dribbles out of your ears. Whether this is a pleasant feeling depends on your general take on *Lord of the Rings* and its embodiment of fantasy.

Gamers who are also Tolkien lovers—a pretty significant crossover, at that—have been keeping a close watch on what developer Turbine Entertainment is doing with their collective preciousssss as it readies *Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* for release in 2007. A few months ago, the company was buried under heaps of *Lord of the Rings*–related materials, learning Quenya, debating whether Glorfindel of Rivendell is the same as Glorfindel of Gondolin, deciding if Hobbits have ever worn or should ever wear shoes, and discussing the heterosexuality of Tom Bombadil.

This slavish devotion to the lore initially turned the developers against the idea of including any form of player-vs.-player combat. But something changed their minds—a few loud yea-sayers? Perhaps two doors down? The team has decided to ship the game with PvP, and to roll out heftier versions as time goes by. They have said, right out of the starting gate, that the system they're planning will neither interfere with the premise of Tolkien's trilogy nor be somehow a "bad fit" for the lore.

[above] Other Monster players can see who you are, but you cannot talk to the "regular" players. This way you can go in anonymously and have the feeling of griefing, but it's not griefing. Anyone else who's there knows that all bets are off. [opposite page] Most of your accomplishment goals will not be to "find players and kill them"—but this Dwarf may not know that.

A Middle-earth in which Hobbits and Dwarves and Elves run around whacking one another with sticks simply can't happen, so the idea of open-ended PvP was out of the question. What about "arena-based PvP"? No, because this is also a game where slaughter without cause is an unacceptable motivation for adventure.

So the designers at Turbine have come up with a concept they call Monster Play, which they believe is a reasonably good solution to the dilemma of adding PvP without compromising world authenticity. "Monster Play has had a long history in this process for a lot of different reasons," says producer Jeff Steefel. "But the intent has always been the same: How do we provide a way for you to play evil things in Middle-earth?

Although Shadows of Angmar's player-vs.-player model is rather unique, its basic gameplay follows the well-known model of character creation, grouping, forming kinships (guilds), questing, crafting, and gaining achievement experience. In the role of a Man, Hobbit, Elf, or Dwarf, you won't be directly involved with the main plot; rather, you'll be traveling parallel to it. While Frodo and the Fellowship are cart-wheeling toward Mount Doom, you'll be building your own adventure, occasionally crossing path with **key characters** in the story.

Which is not a simple challenge. And how do we quell the voices of people who shout, 'Why is there no playable race of Orcs?' We can't do that." (There is no plan for faction-based PvP, at least not at release.) "[We also asked ourselves], 'How do we create shorter sessions for the mass market, making a good game for people who can't always play 14 hours at a time?'"

The short answer is that you will be able to jump into the skin of a Monster for a single session, in a one-shot, non-persistent adventure that is encapsulated and can showcase different gameplay elements that exist in the "normal" gameworld. You get a taste of what being evil is like without completely corrupting the landscape, and you end up with some rewards. "I can come in for a 10-minute experience, a 30-minute experience, or an hour experience. That's very powerful," says Steefel.

Originally, the idea was that you'd decide before you began to play whether you were into Monster Play or Regular Play. Or, if you were playing one of your Regulars, you'd have to log out of the game, back into the reality of your office, family room, or hovel, and Middle-earth would vanish like, um, Brigadoon.

Initially, the team liked that idea. It was something they called a "coin-op" experience. You would enter the game, put in your 25¢, and go to this little interface where you could choose from a selection of Monsters

and be transported to a session; when that session ended, you'd be kicked back out to the selection interface. Eventually, however, the team decided that this sucked. So your experience now takes place entirely within the framework of the game.

"There's just something about controlling a Monster instead of playing a Monster race that, in an odd way, is going to be really fun," says Steefel, "because there's this sense of abandon that you get because it's this 'toy' you're playing with."

"We played through one situation with a Troll—this huge, hulking character, just swatting Dwarves left and right," chimes-in systems designer Nik Davidson (who has not been able to find the missing C in his first name since the late 1980s). "And it doesn't feel like any other MMO experience. You know that's not your character. That's way too powerful to be your character. But it's a ton of fun to play."

As you're playing your Regular character, you may stumble across a possible Monster adventure. You'll then have a choice to accept the "mission" or not. As you find a particular NPC or a particular object, or look into the special well, or whatever (it'll vary with each case), something will kick off an incident that gives you the option of choosing a Monster to play. Probably your first encounter will be with an NPC to introduce you to the mechanic; then, when you're used to it, you'll come across alternative contact points. You can go in and head directly for one of these things once you know where they are. (Of course, within a half hour of launch, the locations will be plastered all over the Internet: "Hello? OGaming?")

Other Monster players will be able to see who you are; to them, the Monster name will be a derivative of your main character's name, but you cannot talk to Regular players. They'll see you only as "That Fat, Wart-covered, Bearded Orc."

"You can actually go in anonymously and have the *feeling* of griefing," Steefel says. "But it's not actually griefing, because you're in an area where everyone in there knows they're in a place where all bets are off." Turbine envisions scenarios where you can hide and lurk among Monster NPCs to lure unsuspecting Regulars.

"I can imagine players studying our pathfinding and AI, and then mimicking it too, like…"

Davidson guffaws.

Sauron on being misunderstood: "I am but a humble jeweler from Valinor. I really don't know where all this animosity toward me is coming from. The Dwarves get seven rings, the Elves get three, the Men get nine. I make **one plain gold hoop** and the whole continent freaks. Big jerks!"

[above] Developers say that it's really all about "The Three Evil Food Groups: Kill, Steal, and Destroy." [left] An Orc ravaged landscape finds the limber guys practicing battle tactics using the most basic calisthenics.

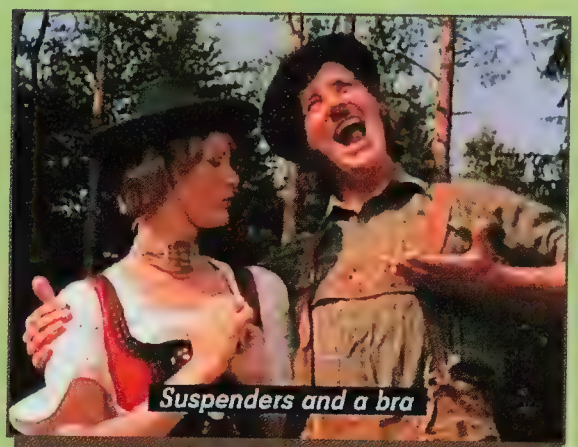
Steefel shoots him a look: "You know they will. Of *course* they will. They'll do anything they can so that they'll be able to do something that we were sure they couldn't do."

One of the effects they're hoping will enhance the experience is Monster Vision. What does the world look like through their eyes? Steefel says, "When we prototyped it, we took an Orc and we basically said, 'Orcs are not great with sunlight, so what happens when an Orc runs out into a sunny day? Or when the sun comes up?' We actually had a dynamic effect so that when the sun comes up, your vision as an Orc starts to get a little funky and cloudy and it's hard to see. On the contrary, at night when the sun goes down, your vision will be better than average, and you'll see things a bit more clearly."

The goal is to give every monster a trait that is specific to its type. For a Troll, for ex-

crafting system

Turbine initially viewed a crafting system as a risky venture, according to the "Do it well or don't do it at all" school of thought. In fact, it was almost cut completely. Luckily for tradeskill fans, the axe never fell. The method is straightforward: harvesting a resource, detecting a crafting site, executing a recipe, and producing a product. But the advancement path for crafting, which parallels the story and the numeric progression that you'll experience through the course of the game, is a bit more intricate. The interdependent Vocations and Professions have distinct milestones, promoting the idea of Proficiency vs. Mastery.



Wormtongue on mistakes he's made: "I respected Eowyn as a friend and colleague. I'm not saying she's an imbecile, just very young and a bit melodramatic. And I think in the way of young girls she just took certain secrets I shared with her about my bathing habits out of context. Oh, and those Ents I take it, then, that no one in Rohan has ever had **need of lumber**?"

ample, the camera might be placed really high to look down on everything. As for a Spider, well… "We talked about goofy things like multiple images, but it'd have to be cool—not actually be frustrating and not actually impede your gameplay," says Steefel, indicating that, intellectually, they're very comfortable with this.

As fun as it may sound, you will not be able to walk down Main Street in Bree in your Monster regalia. Perhaps the most challenging thing in the entire Monster Play scenario will be making the whole world picture seem "natural" when Monster players are restricted by geography. The areas in which they are contained are all one-way; that is to say that Regulars can get into those places, but Monster players cannot get out.

"You're going to be in a place where it feels 'logical' for you to be—for instance, we're not going to have walls with signs that say 'Monster Player Entrance,'" says Steefel. "Regular players will be warned, though, before entering a Monster region."

"Yeah! There'll be sirens and blinking lights and big signs that say, 'Danger! Now Entering Monster Area!'" says Davidson.

"Uh… no," says Steefel. "You will need to seek this area out, and you will be warned before you get there."

The entry and exit points of the area will be constricted so that you're not looking at a huge open border like the one between the U.S. and Canada, with Monster Play on one side and no Monster Play on the other. So running back and forth across the border playing "Neener, neener, neeeeener" really isn't going to be practical, because that border point will be, in some cases, a defended human fortification. The idea of a monster player hanging out in the middle of it is a little more unlikely.

"Intellectually we're very comfortable with the solution. Now we're going to try it out and see what happens," says Steefel.

Dungeon Brawl

D&D Online tries to roll a crit

A year ago, Turbine senior game systems designer David Eckleberry was very confident that *Dungeons & Dragons Online* was simply not a good vehicle for player-vs.-player combat. "We're quite comfortable with our decision not to implement PvP," he said. "That's not to say that down the line we won't introduce some kind of a dueling system, but real free-for-all PvP? No. The *D&D* rules system doesn't support it." One year later, "down the line" has arrived. *D&D Online*'s Module 3 will introduce a lot of new content and a number of game-bending changes, one of which is the introduction of a PvP system.

The initial vision for *D&D Online* was to replicate a group-oriented dungeon crawl, similar to what pen-and-paper players have experienced in basements worldwide for decades. "I think we've done an excellent job of that," says executive producer James Jones. "I don't think anybody has better dungeons than ours."

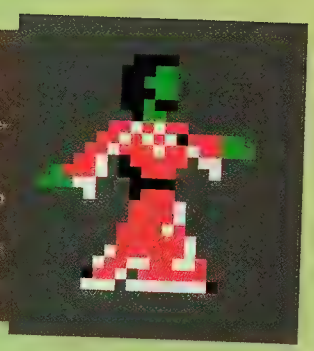
Yes, it was a good dungeon crawl, but many folks didn't think that meant it was a good MMO, and it has to be both. "We're trying to give [players] the feeling that there's an actual world, and you're not just in a city flying from instance to instance," says Jones. To that end, they've added a large desert landscape to the equation. It opens up the world a lot, not just visually but in that you can actually earn XP points as you travel through it. Granted, the instances are attached to it, but it's not quite the objective-based model they started with.

The team is raising the level cap from 10 to 12 and adding more general MMO features like an in-game mail system and an auction house. "We're hoping that will help distribute a lot of the items and treasure that are coming out of the world right now, so that players can get more rewards from that standpoint," says Jones.

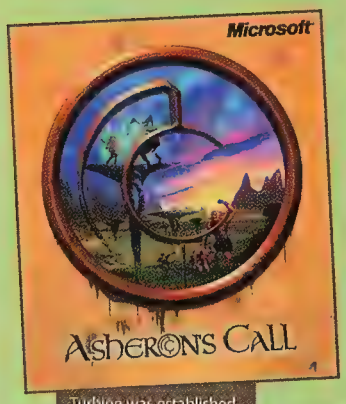
Other additions are new solo-able content—which is so not *D&D*, but it's what players said they wanted—and, of course, PvP. It's very straightforward and comes in two flavors: Tavern Brawls, where you jump into a barroom area like pit bulls and stage a free-for-all battle; and Arena Combat, which is a bit more structured, with a party-building system and objective-based activities, like Deathmatch and Capture the Flag.

"This particular module is one of the largest single expansions in any MMO," says Jones. "We're adding a lot of systems and a lot of content, all within eight months of our initial launch." –Cindy Yans

The high concept of player-vs.-player combat is old. Really old. Military-miniatures-found-in-Pharaohs'-tombs old. Most people agree that the term "PvP" originated in **Neverwinter Nights**, launched on AOL in 1991. The first game completely devoted to player-killing was *Genocide*, released in 1992. In 1996, *Meridian 59* was launched with PvP, and just about every major release since then has included it in some form. This feature has been used by some of the more antisocial players to ruin games for everybody else. These were and still are referred to as "griefers," the bane of PvP fans who "play fair" and the target of many decisions that developers make to combat this practice.



Middle-earth Goblins are a rather mysterious race. A smaller breed of Orc that prefers to dwell deep in the most treacherous passages of Middle-earth, they are feared for their stealthy entrances onto the battlefield by way of numerous tunnels, their ability to cunningly scavenge their weapons of war, and their strength in numbers.



Turbine was established in 1994 and went on to release **Asheron's Call** and its *Dark Majesty* expansion, as well as *Asheron's Call 2*. *Asheron's Call 2* was shut down last year, but the original is still going and is celebrating its seventh anniversary. Earlier this year, the company launched *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, and it is the exclusive licensee for both the development and publishing of games based on the *Lord of the Rings* books, having acquired the rights from Vivendi Universal in January 2005.

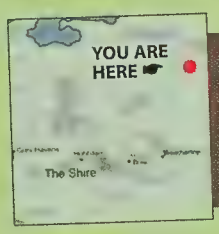
Sure, there's the cool factor in playing a Monster. Although you can't level your Monster or gather persistent "stuff," rewards will be firmly planted in the system. "If I walk into an area in a town, and these areas are going to be pretty big," says Steefel, "I want the environment to react to me. So if there are non-combatant NPCs in that town, they should run away from me. Scared of me. Just by my pure existence. And how cool does that make me feel? Walking down the road, everybody's running away from me because they don't have a weapon, or they don't think they can take me on. This way, you can [he sports a big movie announcer voice] 'Establish Your Prominence in the Halls of Evil!'" That's a fancy way of saying they're going to have leader boards.

But, as much fun as bragging rights are, there's also something a bit more tangible involved. In the beginning, there'll be a lot of Monsters you just can't inhabit—not until you earn "destiny points" as a result of your Monster Play adventures. The first few guys will be free, because they want you to be able to get into the experience. "But then we want it to be aspirational," says Steefel. "So you want to be a Troll? It'll cost you this many destiny points. Or you want to play the Balrog? You'd better start saving now."

Or go to IGE, which is practically inevitable. Playing the cool, high-level monsters will require an investment. "And if the way you do that is through [ahem]… 'other means,'" says Steefel, "then fine." It's easy to tell he's not really happy about IGE, though, as he adds, "But at present, anyway, the only way to get destiny points is through perspicacious monster play."

Oh yeah, they're sure that players will be selling their entire accounts, complete with a zillion destiny points. But Steefel accepts that. "If you don't build it… they will come anyway," he jokes.

Some missions may have follow-ups that offer increasingly more points. For example, an objective might be "Kill five Hobbits and cut off their feet." Completing this mission will give you a destiny point reward and unlock the next level: "Kill five Hobbits," then 500, then complete genocide (well, probably not, but you get the idea). The failure condition on each additional level will be to choose either "cash out" or get killed trying.



Angmar was founded in T.A. 1300 in the far north of the Misty Mountains by the evil Lord of the Ringwraiths. He later became known as the "Witch-king of Angmar." After many years of power struggles, Angmar defeated Arthedain, which, eventually gained allies and rose up to defeat the kingdom of Angmar, although the Nazgul king fled to Mordor unharmed. Angmar remained in shadows… until now.

"It's very much a tiered reward structure," says Steefel. "If you end up getting 49 out of 50, you've not completed that mission. There's no partial reward. It's not incremental. It's very—well, the analogy I used yesterday was 'Skeeball'" (i.e., Quality, Service & Dependability Since 1909). "The difference between 290 points and 300 points is, maybe, 20 tickets. But in the actual gameplay experience you got really close."

If you decide to continue, you don't lose the reward you got on any previous level. You can choose a rather broad experience, for instance, kill five Hobbits, then bring ten weapons to camp, then deflower five Elven maidens, etc.

"You can earn a lot of little rewards," says Steefel. "Or you can take one particular thing and try to hold out for the really juicy reward at the top."

"Which means I can come back to this experience many, many times with different outcomes," says Davidson.

You must always start with the first level, though. The whole idea is to offer a self-contained, session-based experience. "The minute you break that seal, it becomes totally different," says Steefel.

Destiny points have value for your main characters as well. They can be used for two things: to buy a better Monster and to buy perks for your character. Perks are basically buffs—short- to medium-term good buffs. You can use them to give one of your newer characters a boost through some of the earlier levels, or to get your main character through a sticky situation.

"Perks are simply an alternate vector of advancement," says Steefel. The goal is that, when you're playing your non-monster characters, you will have a large variety of traits and buffs from which to choose depending on the situation. Davidson adds, "And you'll be able to choose which character you give them to."

Steefel looks at him funny. "Really?"

All of these PvP features will be available from day one. "You shouldn't have to *earn* the right to have fun," says Steefel. "That's the way earlier MMOs operated—and yes, I'm as responsible for those MMOs as anyone. [Steefel was former vice president of programming and production for Sony Online Entertainment–ed] But you had to go through a lot of drudgery to get to the point where you 'deserved' to actually have some fun. And I don't think the current audience cares for that much. I don't think any of us really did. We just pretended that we did, because it seemed cool and challenging.

"We're really pretty confident that people who are playing *World of WarCraft* and people who are playing other MMOs right now will be comfortable in this game, and I don't mean comfortable like 'Hey, it's the same game,' but comfortable like the important things are where they belong. Like we didn't take a steering wheel and put it in the trunk just because we thought it would be cool and unique. The things that work? We've just taken them and made them better."

And, intellectually, they're very comfortable with this. ■

Tom Bombadil on being cut from the movies: "My people met with **Peter Jackson**'s people, everything was fine on my end. I'm what we in the biz call a 'triple threat': I sing, I do magic, and I kick trees. But I guess I'm not as 'street' as a guy in tights with a bow or with wizards in dresses. Anyway, so Goldberry gets a call from Jackson saying New Line wants me to 'tone it down a little.' 'Two words,' says I, 'Hey-dolly-hoo-delly-hoo-hah-hee-holy-olé-oh or I walk!' True story."

Daniel Greenberg is a game designer, scriptwriter, and Tolkien scholar. He has studied Tolkien lore and literature at several universities and the Smithsonian Institution, lectures on Middle-earth at conventions and mythology conferences, and has been a Tolkien consultant for companies like Sierra, Surreal, Vivendi Universal Games, Liquid Entertainment, and Turbine.

Touched by

"I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama."

—*J.R.R. Tolkien, Letter to Milton Waldman*

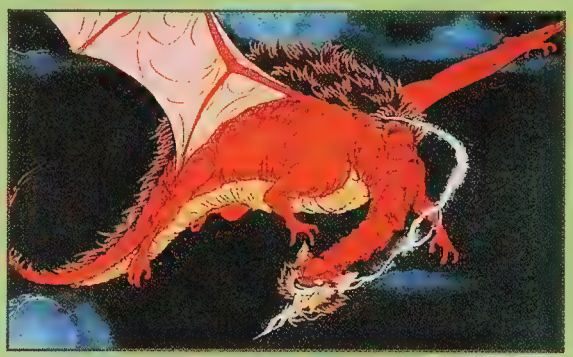
The Lord of the Rings resonates for millions of readers around the world from the moment they fold back the first page. The books' rich scope and vivid detail cause an entire mythological world to blossom fully formed in the imagination. Even first-time readers seem to recognize the authentic Middle-earth and can sniff out pale imitations. So where do some of the adaptors go wrong?

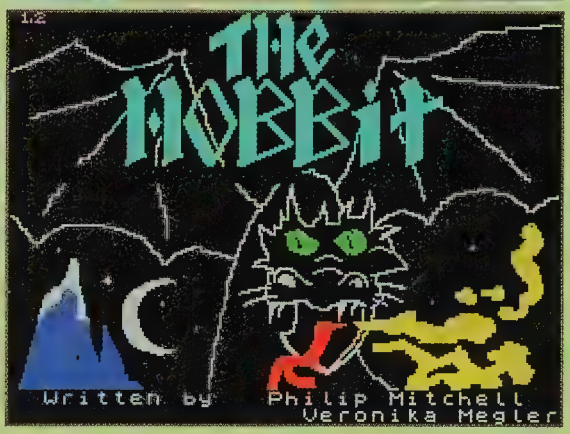
Let's take a look at the use (and misuse) of J.R.R. Tolkien's content in videogames and other media and compare it with Tolkien's own words about his works. Dozens of Tolkien-inspired videogames have popped up over the last few decades, some licensed, some not, some very good, and some… well, what on (Middle-) earth were they thinking?

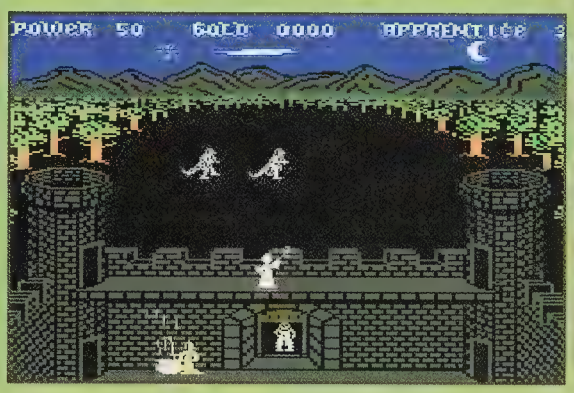
Although some fans insist that Tolkien opposed the adaptation of his works, his own words show he supported it, with mixed feelings. In 1968, Tolkien sold the movie and merchandising rights to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* to United Artists, but not to the unfinished *The Silmarillion*, to the chagrin of fans still yearning to battle Gothmog for the fate of Fëanor. To this day, no one has rights to that book, not even EA.

Tolkien's stated policy in considering offers was "Art or Cash. Either very profitable terms indeed, or absolute author's veto on objectionable features or alterations." Improbable as it may have seemed to Tolkien at the time, it eventually turned out that commercial works could also be quite faithful to the source. Think of the three movie adaptations from 2001–2003, in which, as director Peter Jackson said of *King Kong*, "It's the lunatics in charge of the asylum."

Tolkien's conflicted feelings about adaptations were evident even before he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. When discussing illustrators for the first U.S. edition of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien wrote in a 1937 letter to C.A. Furth, of Allen and Unwin, "I am divided between knowledge







[far right] In some cases, game designers appeared to veer away from the source material, and ended up with games that looked a whole lot like other adaptations. For example, the Dragon Smaug in Melbourne House's 1982 graphical text adventure *The Hobbit* has a similar oddly feline face and hairy back as in the 1977 Rankin/Bass animated TV version—coincidences not supported by the text. [right] In the unlicensed 1984 Commodore 64 game *Gandalf the Sorcerer* from Game Gems, a figure in a white robe uses a wand to blast "lizardmen"—hardly the height of authenticity.

Other Minds

Tolkien hasn't been treated well by videogames. A Tolkien scholar and game designer tells you why. BY DANIEL GREENBERG

Star Wars Cantina? The Fellowship of the Ring Software Adventure.

[above left] Some critics have also complained that one of the problems with Sierra's *The Hobbit* was a level of art stylization that brought the game too close to Disney's cartoon approach. Similar complaints were leveled at Vivendi's *War of the Ring*. [above] Videogames had their share of visual oddities, like a Sauron depicted with satanic-looking goat horns (about as incongruous as Michelangelo's strange sculpture of Moses with goat horns).

of my own inability and fear of what American artists (doubtless of admirable skill) might produce." He could just as easily have been talking about filmmakers or game developers.

So Tolkien included warnings to would-be adapters. He would "let the Americans do what seems good to them—as long as it was possible… to veto anything from or influenced by the Disney studios (from all whose works I have a heartfelt loathing)." Given that, perhaps it's not surprising that "Disneyfied" versions of Tolkien's works have failed both commercially and artistically. The fans are just as aware as Tolkien that they don't feel right.

Tolkien's fears were realized in early attempts to adapt his works. In a scathingly funny critique of the first attempt to adapt *The Lord of the Rings* to the screen in the late 1950s, Tolkien said of the scriptwriter, "Why does Z put beaks and feathers on *Orcs*? 'Orcs' is not a form of 'Auks.'"

Sometimes, games adapted from Tolkien's works seemed to borrow more from the vision of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which also borrowed from Tolkien, though not always well. One example of this is *Shadows of Mordor: A Software Adventure*, from Addison-Wesley. Its visual images of Orcs bore no relation to Tolkien's descriptions but had an uncanny resemblance to the *D&D* pig-faced interpretation of them that dates back to the mid-1970s (which, in turn, may have been lifted from the pig-like description of monstrous "Orcs" in the 16th-century poem *Orlando Furioso*, by Ludovico Ariosto).

Tolkien summed up the 1950s attempt to adapt his works by saying "the constructor of this [movie storyline] is quite incapable of excerpting or adapting the 'spoken words' of the book. He is hasty, insensitive, and impertinent."

When Mr. Bilbo Baggins celebrated his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, it was the talk of the Shire.

Lord of the 1980s

After the success of Peter Jackson's movies in 2001, a veritable flood of *Lord of the Rings* games appeared. They were the first released since the veritable flood of games that appeared between 1982 and 1991 and are profiled here. Take this trip through games past....

❶ Shadowfax (1982)
From Mike Singleton, who would go on to do *Lords of Midnight* and other games, came this old-school entry where, as Gandalf, you blasted your way through wave after wave of Nazgul. (Postern)

❷ The Hobbit (1982)
This text adventure came with a paperback version of the book. (Melbourne House)

❸ Fellowship of the Ring (1986)
This "illustrated adventure" was still text-based, and apparently not very good. (Addison-Wesley)

❹ Shadows of Mordor (1987)
This "real-time text adventure" (no kidding) let you direct Sam or Frodo through the events in *The Two Towers*. (Addison-Wesley)

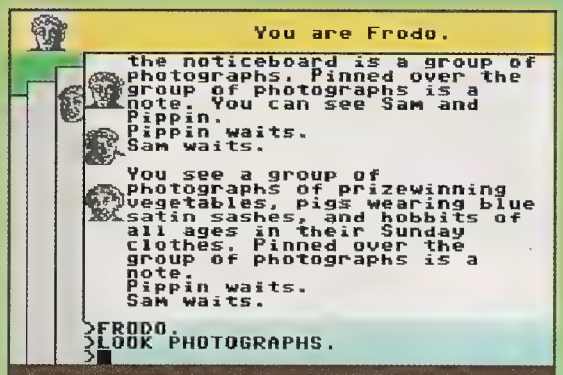
❺ War in Middle Earth (1988)
Another one from Mike Singleton, this strategy game let you command and direct armies as you defended against Sauron. You moved troops on a map and watched the battles play out. (Melbourne House)

❻ Crack of Doom (1989)
There's a flatulence joke just waiting to be made about the name of this, the last of the trilogy of text adventures. (Addison-Wesley)

❼ Lord of the Rings, Vol. I: The Fellowship of the Ring (1990)
This terrific multi-character fantasy role-playing game really brought the books to life. It was one of the most graphically impressive games of its day, and the action closely followed the source material. (Interplay)

❽ Riders of Rohan (1991)
Defend Rohan and take on Saruman in this strategy game set before the siege of Helm's Deep. Move masses of armies and fight "action" battles. (Konami)

❾ Lord of the Rings, Vol. II: The Two Towers (1992)
The adventure continues in this second edition of Interplay's proposed trilogy, though this version is notoriously buggy. (Incidentally, it appeared on the cover of the 14th issue of this magazine.) According to an uncredited source in the Wikipedia, a third installment was canned because Interplay couldn't decide whether to do it as an RPG or as a strategy game. (Interplay)


You are Frodo.
the noticeboard is a group of photographs. Pinned over the group of photographs is a note. You can see Sam and Pippin.
Pippin waits.
Sam waits.
You see a group of photographs of prizewinning vegetables, pigs wearing blue satin sashes, and hobbits of all ages in their Sunday clothes. Pinned over the group of photographs is a note.
Pippin waits.
Sam waits.
>FRODO.
>LOOK PHOTOGRAPHS.

The Fellowship of the Ring Software Adventure descended past bad word choices into the unforgivable realm of the complete failure to "get it." We see this starting from the very first screen in the game, which includes this gem: "Covering the noticeboard is a group of photographs." Who knew Frodo was into photography? Perhaps he enjoyed videogames, too.

Tolkien's videogame adapters have also concocted some pretty dreadful writing. This may be forgivable in a conventional video game, but not with this kind of literary license. What excuse can there be for lines like "You are in a decrepit barroom with several alcohol-mutated beings propped up on stools"? That's from the dreadful *The Fellowship of the Ring Software Adventure* from Beam Software and Melbourne House. That kind of scene is far more appropriate to the *Star Wars* cantina scene than to Tolkien.

Not only does the text fail accurately to describe the scene, but the use of "mutated" violates Tolkien's explicit rules against the "scientification" of Middle-earth. The use of a word with such modern, scientific connotations breaks the sense of seamless immersion in Earth's mythological prehistory. This title contains numerous sloppy errors, like "Bagend" instead of "Bag End," "mosquitos [sic]" instead of "midges," and many more.

Tolkien was adamant that "The canons of narrative art in any medium cannot be wholly different." OK, videogames often offer challenges beyond those of other media, but nonetheless, the interactive content must be true to its noninteractive source.

How much freedom should the designers give to the player? Should the designers build-in actions that are far out of character for the likes of Elves or Hobbits? *The Fellowship of the Ring Software Adventure* allows the Hobbits to kill one another. Not even Turbine made this choice for *Lord of the Rings Online*, though its environment is much more PvP appropriate. Character choices, like allowing a player Gandalf to decide whether or not to claim the One Ring, could make for interesting gameplay. But "Grand Theft Frodo" in a Shire full of killable characters would not be in keeping with the content of the books.

Still, there is a fine line between the two approaches. For example, the 1982 version of *The Hobbit* included innovations like a robust parser capable of interpreting rather complex sentences and NPCs who were "living" in the world according to their own schedules. This kind of

emergent behavior led to interesting situations: For instance, Bilbo could get weapons earlier than scheduled and therefore could kill Elrond. Bilbo could even talk Thorin into entering a river that would kill him. It was either the designers' guilt about killing Thorin or a really, really bad continuity bug, since Thorin appeared later in the game, dead or not.

Current license-holder Tolkien Enterprises has taken a strong stand on all games following the letter and spirit of the Tolkien universe. (Note that Tolkien Enterprises is a separate company from the family-connected Tolkien Estate, which is a common error made by fans and pros alike.)

The Tolkien source material lends itself to all sorts of clever manipulation, but doing it well isn't always easy. Videogame developers often don't do enough of the type of preproduction and previsualization work that goes into the best movies.

Sometimes developers fail to deliver well-interpreted Tolkien content simply because they don't get it, and sometimes they may make too many concessions to time and budget. But sometimes failure is the result of plain old-fashioned control issues: companies refusing to trust the folks they hire. Some even hire yes-men with no background in Tolkien scholarship rather than risk being told no.

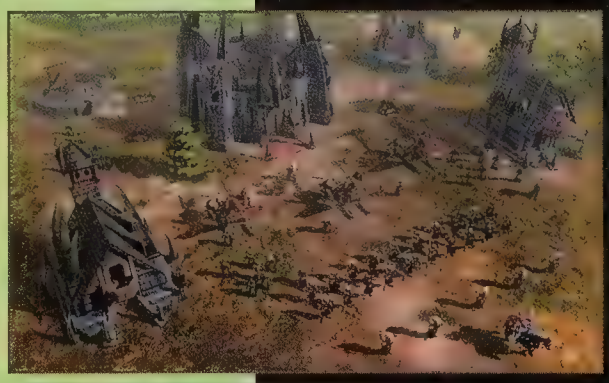
Fortunately, there are games that show the team tried really hard to get it right. *Shadows of Mordor* has an interactive scene where the player gets to pause in the action to cook rabbits. Interplay's *Fellowship of the Ring* not only had fine graphics and gameplay in its day, but its Tolkien references are excellent. It is one of the rare examples in the gaming world of the lunatics' being allowed to run the asylum with a winning result.

Many consider *The Two Towers* games from EA to be successful, not necessarily because of any ambitious storytelling, but because they are inspired by the scholarship of the film adaptations. They focus on what both films and videogames do so well: namely, action. Though Peter Jackson complained about the games, they provide a strong sense of being in Middle-earth, or at least in the parts where creatures like to fight. Fans have high hopes that EA's upcoming *The White Council* and Turbine's *Lord of the Rings Online* will set a course away from a mere "preference for fights" and deliver exciting gameplay with many dimensions. ■

Angmar in Shadow

Battle for Middle-earth II: Rise of the Witch King is a long enough name to be its own subtitle

It's interesting, but probably coincidental, that Electronic Arts' *Rise of the Witch King*—the expansion to its highly regarded RTS *Battle for Middle-earth II*—is set in Angmar, the same area that's central to Turbine's *Lord of the Rings Online*. Why was this region such an attraction for both developers? The details of its rich history had remained pretty much unelaborated throughout the early days of the saga of the One Ring, making it a canvas on which to slather some new but appropriate portraiture. Turbine's MMO allows players to develop the story, and *Rise of the Witch King* builds its own saga about the evil that began to rise in the northwest during the thousands of years before Peter Jackson inherited the Ring. There, the Nazgul Lord who eventually fled to ally with Sauron in the Piña Colada–saturated playground of Mordor had time and space to spread evil throughout the region. "We are really teeing off on that core compulsion of letting people be the bad guy," says producer Amir Rahimi.



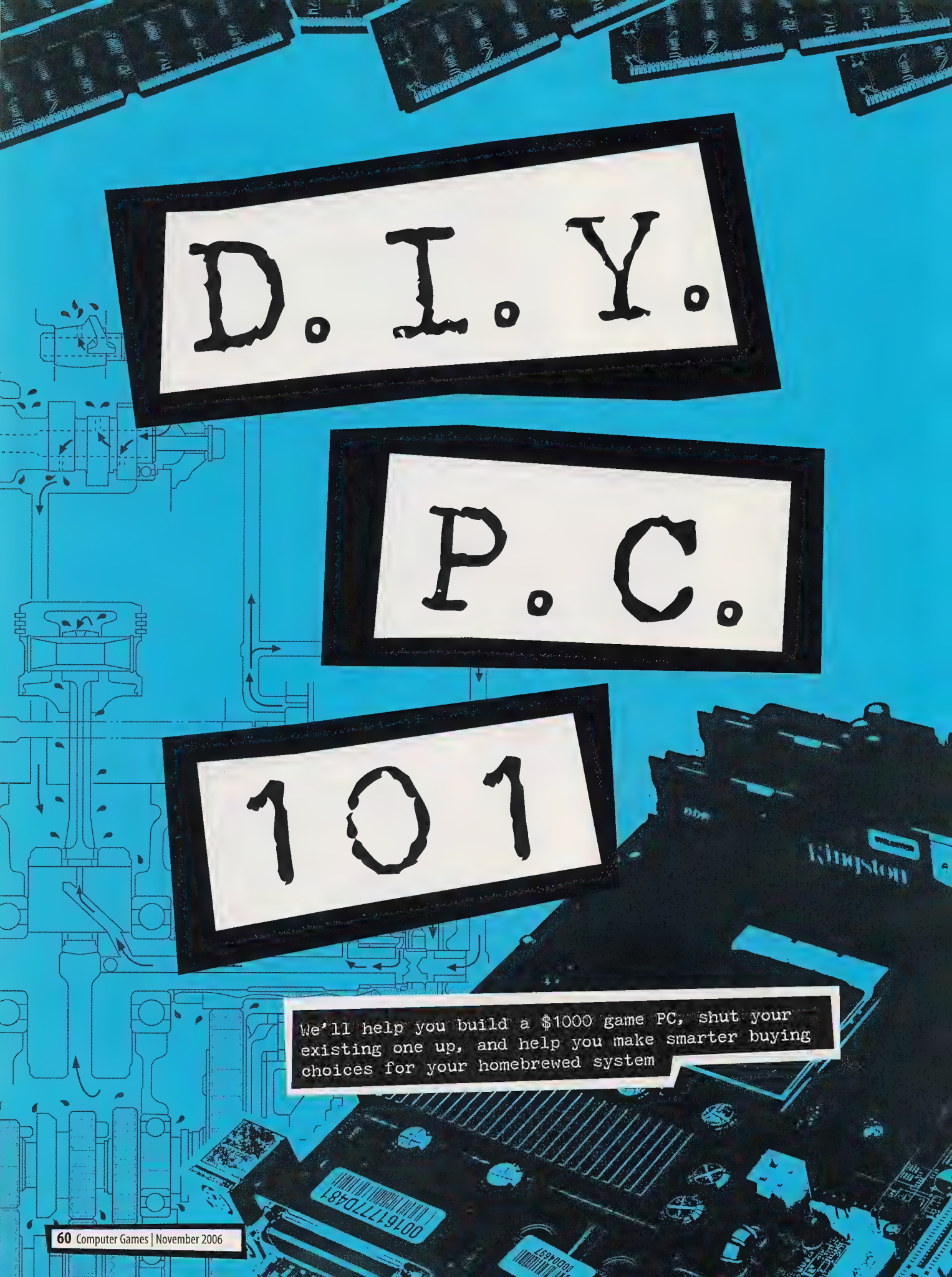
[top] You'll see the return of the importance of siege warfare, similar to the way it was in the first Battle for Middle-earth game. [above] They've enhanced unit formations to allow armies to retain their positions during travel.

In addition to its uncharacteristic geography, the expansion introduces two new units and an improved hero creation component. "[The faction of] Angmar is extremely unique and will have some very inventive and creative abilities," says EA Los Angeles community manager Aaron Kaufman. "Particularly the Thrall Master—he is awesome. And wait until you see our Troll Hero Rogash jump high up in the air and slam his mace down to shatter a battalion of troops across the screen. He takes inspiration from Gimli's leaping ability, but that's like comparing the power of Sauron to that of a Hobbit."

Usually found tagging along with the new Sorcerer is a bunch of acolytes who behave like suicide bombers. Every spell he casts uses up some of his followers' souls, and they will spontaneously be destroyed. "This introduces this very interesting risk-versus-reward dynamic," says Rahimi. "Where the Sorcerers' acolytes serve as his currency to be able to cast spells, but they're also his protection."

The team has kept an eye on the type of things *Battle for Middle-earth* players have asked for and is delivering many of them, in the hope that what fans *say* they want is what they actually want. Fans are funny that way.
–Cindy Yans

D.I.Y. P.C. 101



We'll help you build a $1000 game PC, shut your existing one up, and help you make smarter buying choices for your homebrewed system

If you want a fast gaming machine, you don't have to spend money like it's going out of style

BY PAUL JASTRZEBSKI

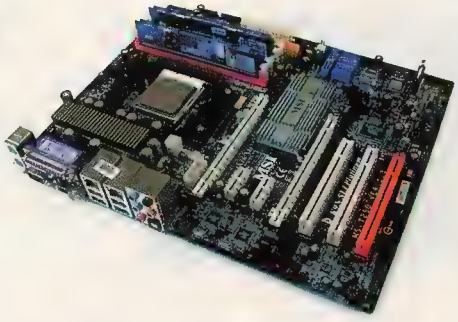
Four years ago, we had it easy. High-end graphic cards were priced at $399. A top-of-the-line CPU set you back around $499. If you wanted the absolute fastest system around, you could do it for around $1600.

Today's PC environment is drastically different. "Extreme" CPUs cost a cool grand; the fastest videocard will set you back $500 or more (double that if you want to go with two cards). $3500 is the new $1600.

This puts most of us in a tough position. We want to play the games of today and the ones of tomorrow with smooth frame rates on our new, large, LCD monitors, but we don't want to break the bank to do so. With that in mind, here's the $1000 gaming PC, an excellent machine with new, modern parts that delivers terrific performance at a reasonable price.

CPU: AMD Athlon 64 X2 4200+ (Socket AM2) : $180

The most important—and difficult—choice to make is that of your CPU. Intel finally caught up with—and passed—AMD with the Core 2 Duo processor, but AMD's Athlon 64 X2s are still competitive. So we spent days analyzing the CPU selection for this article. The retail AMD Athlon 64 X2 4200+ on AMD's new AM2 socket eventually beat out Intel Core 2 Duo E6300 because of its wide availability and larger selection of motherboards. The X2 4200+ is priced at a very reasonable $180 and features dual-core technology, essentially meaning that there are two 2.2GHz cores on one chip. Dual-core will be essential, as more and more software is being written to take advantage of multithreading. If you're planning on gaming on your PC in the next two years, a single-core CPU simply won't cut it.



Motherboard: MSI K9N SLI Platinum (Socket AM2) : $120

Once you choose a CPU, the next step is finding the motherboard that delivers the most value. We've chosen MSI's NVIDIA nForce 570 SLI-based K9N SLI Platinum for its impressive features, excellent design, good support, and SLI capability. It features dual gigabit LAN, firewire, RAID 0, 1, 0+1, and 5, 7.1 Channel HD Audio, six USB 2.0 ports, passive cooling, and an extremely flexible BIOS that allows for great overclocking. The nForce 570 SLI chipset itself currently holds the sweet spot in the AM2 motherboard market, not only because of its excellent performance but because it gives you the flexibility to add a second graphics card in the future. For $125, you'd be hard-pressed to find anything better.

Memory: Kingston HyperX KHX6000D2K2/2G (2GB kit of DDR2) : $220

Next up is the choice of memory, another very difficult decision we all face when building our PCs. With dozens of different manufacturers peddling DDR2 at many different speeds and latencies, it can get confusing and frustrating trying to find the perfect fit for your motherboard and CPU combination. Some companies have been known to sell slow memory overclocked to higher frequencies and lower latencies just to make a few quick bucks, so choosing a reputable manufacturer is one of the wisest decisions you can make. For this system, we've chosen a 2GB kit of Kingston's KHX6000D2K2/2G DDR2 memory. Although it is priced around $30 higher than other competing kits, Kingston offers a rock-solid lifetime warranty with its HyperX line. When choosing memory on a budget, it's important to note that latency and overall speed do not play very big parts in the overall performance of a system. Extreme low-latency memory can often be priced 30% higher than other modules, while delivering a marginal performance gain of 2-3% in most of today's games.

Graphics Card:
NVIDIA GeForce 7900GS : $200

For a gaming PC, the graphics card is arguably the most important single component in the box. For that reason alone, we recommend spending a little more on the graphics card and a little less on the CPU. The 200MHz difference in CPU speed will have less of an impact than going from a GeForce 7600GT to a 7900GS. The GeForce 7900GS is the sweet spot in NVIDIA's current GPU product line, featuring a 256-bit memory interface, a 450MHz core clock, 660MHz memory clock, and 256MB of GDDR3 memory.

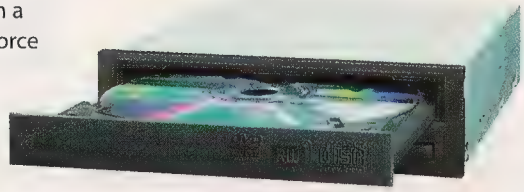
> "Spend a little more on the graphics card and a little less on the CPU."

Hard Drive:
Seagate Barracuda 7200.10 250GB 7200RPM SATA 3.0Gb/s : $80

The hard drive is the least exciting technology inside your PC. It hasn't changed much in the last 10 years. The latest breeds feature 16MB of cache, 300MB/s SATA II transfer rates, Native Command Queuing, and capacities that are hovering right around 1 terabyte. We've chosen this drive because it features all of the latest hard drive technologies, plus a five-year warranty. With hard drive prices falling so drastically, it's difficult to go wrong in this department, and Seagate's latest generation of drives is extremely reliable, feature rich, and moderately priced.

Optical Drive: NEC 16X DVD±R DVD Burner Model ND-3550A : $30

DVD burners have also seen their prices fall to new lows. If you're paying more than $35 for a burner, you're getting ripped off. NEC's ND-3550A is one of the best values currently available, often priced slightly below $30. It features fast burn speeds and excellent reliability. It's very hard to go wrong in this department.



Benchmarks

3DMark05	No AA/AF	4x AA/8X AF
1024×768	**7486**	**6367**
1280×1024	**6389**	**5249**

3DMark06	No AA/AF	4x AA/8X AF
1024×768	**4965**	**N/A***
1280×1024	**4137**	**N/A**

Half-Life 2: Lost Coast	No AA/AF	4x AA/8X AF
1024×768	**90**	**89**
1280×1024	**89**	**84**

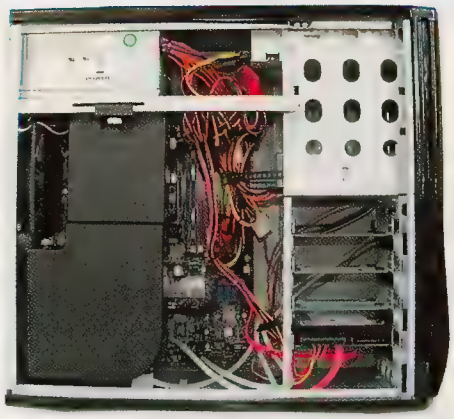
F.E.A.R.	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**63**	**58**
1280×960	**43**	**29**

PCMark 05	
System	**5618**
CPU	**4505**
Memory	**4124**
Hard Drive	**5176**

*NVIDIA cards can't do the 3DMark06 tests with anti-aliasing enabled.

Case/Power Supply: Antec Sonata II Black Mid Tower with 450W True Power PSU : $90

One of the most common mistakes people make when building their gaming PCs is choosing a poor power supply. It's a little-known fact that there is no standards agency that governs power supply ratings, so the 600-watt power supply you bought online for $30 is most likely an over-rated and junky 300-watt one. Because the latest components take up a significant amount of power, you need a reliable power source when putting together your PC. That's precisely why we've chosen the Antec Sonata II, a case that simply hums out value through its silent exhaust fans. It features one of Antec's premier power supplies, a 450W True Power unit that is more than sufficient to handle our current configuration and even an extra 7900GS if we wanted to run in SLI in the future. The case also features a CPU duct that goes right over the CPU's heatsink and provides a route for the hot air that typically floats around your system to flow outside of your case. The Sonata II only uses one 120mm exhaust fan, keeping overall noise extremely low, almost whisper quiet.



Operating System: Windows XP Home Edition OEM : $80

Finally, our computer needs an operating system, and if you're looking to play PC games, Windows XP is the only choice. The OEM version of Windows XP Home Edition can be found online for just about $80, a good value since the retail price is $199.

Ready... Power it Up

There you have it. Here's a system that anyone can be proud of, for $1000. When you compare its benchmarks with something like the Voodoo Omen, sure, it comes up short. But when you compare the price, you have to ask if the Omen's worth another $6000. This machine delivers superb performance for the price. Although we live in a world full of high-priced, high-end gear, there's still plenty of value out there. ■

AMD vs. Intel

For the last few years, the choice between AMD and Intel processors for a gaming PC has been simple: If you wanted a faster and cheaper machine, you would go with AMD.

That all changed with the release of Intel's Core 2 Duo processors in July, when the company made its entire Pentium D lineup obsolete. And the competition between the two manufacturers suddenly got a wee bit more interesting, as the midrange Intel model, the $300 E6600, tops the highest-end $800 Athlon FX-62 in most benchmarks.

What did AMD do? It dropped the prices of its processors. A lot. The X2 5000+ dropped from over $600 to $300; the 3200+ is only $80. While Intel beats AMD in performance, AMD (mostly) has Intel on price. Moreover, the availability of Core 2 CPUs is still limited, months after their supposed release.

So, if you're building a machine today, your choices are tougher than they were six months ago. For motherboards, you want the latest socket designs—AM2 for AMD, LGA775 for Intel—and SLI motherboards are a good choice, even if you do not intend to install a second videocard.

If absolute performance is your only goal, the 2.93GHz Core 2 Extreme X6800 is the CPU of choice. It smokes the FX-62 in every single benchmark—synthetic or otherwise—except for memory bandwidth. (As of now, that memory bandwidth lead is mostly an advantage in... memory bandwidth benchmarks. Its real-world impact on games is minimal.) We're talking anywhere from 20-50% boosts for the Core 2 Extreme in most benchmarks and media creation tests. And the Core 2 Extreme does this while running cooler and consuming less electricity than the FX-62. Good job, Intel. No, make that great.

But here's the thing: Outside of real-time strategy games and flight sims, most games will hit the limit of your videocard before they max out your processor. The fastest CPU in the world is no magic bullet to 60FPS in all games at ultra-high resolutions. Performance is way more complicated than that.

Now that Intel has finally delivered a superior gaming processor, the answer to the question "AMD or Intel?" is obvious: It doesn't matter. Both companies produce CPUs with amazing performance at a comparably low cost. Look at other components for guidance, such as a preferred motherboard manufacturer or chipsets, and decide which of those two components works best with your choice of videocard. And if you're budget conscious, spend less on your processor and put that saved money into a faster videocard.
–Steve Bauman

Shut Up!

Does your PC sound like it's about to take off? Here are some tips to keep it quiet

BY STEVE BAUMAN

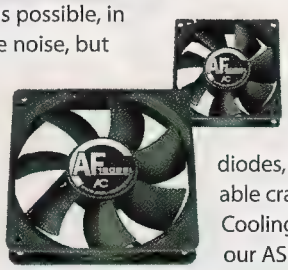
The fastest PC parts run hot. A hot PC needs a lot of fans to keep those parts from melting. And a lot of fans generate a lot of noise.

So keeping your PC cool and quiet is tough. While most PC makers do a good job keeping their machines quiet, most homebrew systems are extremely loud. They tend to have four to eight fans humming along in not-so-pleasant harmony. You have intake and exhaust fans that bring in cool air from the front of your machine and extract the hot air through the back. You have a fan that draws hot air from the heatsink and/or heatpipes that absorb and dissipate the heat from your processor. There's the fan, or fans, that do the same for your videocard. And don't forget the one—or two, or three—in your power supply. Some motherboards have a fan on the chipset, and that tiny thing can make a terrible racket.

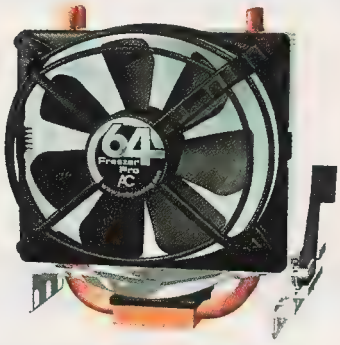
Replacing some of the stock fans that come with the various components in your system can both silence the noise and make your system run cooler.

Intake and Exhaust Fans

These should be as big as possible, in order to cut down on the noise, but you're usually limited by whatever fits in your case. Antec's cases are designed with quiet computing in mind, and most models have 120mm multispeed exhaust fans and empty spots for similarly sized intake fans. You can even purchase adapters that allow you to attach 120mm fans to 92mm mounting points. (These take up a lot of space, however.)



There are many manufacturers of high-quality quiet fans. Some of the names to look for are Antec, Arctic Cooling, Panaflow, Zalman, and Scythe. Watch for low maximum rotational speeds, and try to get ones that can be controlled by your motherboard. They're cheap, too—typically $10 or less—so it's worth experimenting with different models to find what works best.



Processor Fans

Normally, you don't buy fans for your processor. You purchase a heatsink/fan combination. There are hundreds of these on the market, and most sound like rockets. Some even look like them.

In building our own test systems here, we use Zalman heatsink/fans. The current top model is the CNPS9500, which both looks cool and does a killer job. They're pricey, at anywhere from $50-$60, but worth every penny.

Another recommended unit is the XP-120 from Thermalright. It doesn't come with a fan but has a mounting spot for a 120mm one. If you go this route, make sure you get a fan with a temperature sensor and a maximum speed of 2500RPM, like the Tri Cool and SmartCool lines from Antec.

When buying a new heatsink/fan, you have to be careful, because some won't fit on your motherboard due to the placement of various diodes, heatsinks, and other unidentifiable crap. For example, an Arctic Cooling Freezer 64 won't fit on two of our ASUS SLI motherboards, because it hits the heatpipes and heatsinks that help cool the various on-board components.

Videocard Fans

If your videocard is noisy, replace the stock heatsink and fan. Arctic Cooling makes a number of models for various videocards, and they do a terrific job of keeping the videocard cooler and quieter. In testing with the Accelero X1 and a 7800GTX, idle temperatures dropped by over 10 degrees; under load, the differences were even greater. The only downside is that these things are enormous, and they block the slot next to the videocard.

Another option is the Zalman VF900. It has a similar impact on temperatures and noise, but it's smaller and more stylish than the Accelero.

Both are easy to install and will set you back about $30–$50.

Power Supplies

Newer PCs need a lot of electricity, and that translates to a lot of heat. There are a lot of power supplies out there, and many are crap. Your best bet is to go with name brands you've heard of. Few are engineered as well as Antec's Neo NE (which can be problematic in some configurations) and TruePower models. They deliver plenty of juice with little noise.

Other silent PS makers include Seasonic and OCZ with its new GameXStream line.

Resource

The best resource for ways to silence your PC is silentpcreview.com. It features a number of articles—and links to other sites' articles—about how to build silent PCs. But its most useful feature is its forum, which is full of people reporting their experiences with various PC parts and how they contribute to the overall noise level of your PC. Some of these guys are absurdly hardcore, but their recommendations are always solid.

Happy silencing. ■

To RAID or Not to RAID

The hard drive is the biggest performance bottleneck in your system. You can have the fastest processor or videocard in the world, but you're still sitting there staring at a "Loading..." screen before starting a game.

A RAID is one way to improve disk performance. It stands for "Redundant Array of Independent/Inexpensive Disks." What that means is that multiple hard drives are being used to speed up the loading and saving of files and/or to improve the reliability of your drives and safety of your data, depending on the RAID level.

Many high-end game machines come with a RAID 0 setup. What it does is take two drives and turn them into a single one to Windows. The main benefit of this "striping" of data across multiple drives is speed. Since the data is split between the two drives, it's put in optimal places for reading and writing.

RAID 0 improves performance, at least in benchmarks. To use one example, Hitachi's superb 500GB Deskstar 7K500 SATA drive is one of the faster high-capacity drives on the market, with a 16MB buffer instead of the standard 8MB one found on others. A single drive pumps out over 50MB/s in benchmarks, which is competitive with other similar drives. Putting two of them together in a RAID 0 array nearly doubles the result. However, this doesn't translate to significantly improved gamer performance. You may see as little as a 10% reduction in load times.

That minor performance boost may not be worth the risk. It's easy to forget that having two drives doubles your chance of a catastrophic failure. RAID 0 eliminates the "redundant" part of a RAID, so if one drive fails, all of your data is toast.

If you insist on having a system with RAID 0, it's critical to have a backup system in place. Another option is to go with RAID 0+1, which uses an additional drive (or drives) to mirror the data on the RAID 0 array. You get some performance boost, plus data protection. But the added complexity isn't worth it: You're better off having a single drive, or multiple ones, with regular drive-to-drive backups. Sometimes simple is better. –SB

Roll Your Own

Here are some picks for the most critical components of any gaming system: processor and video.

BY STEVE BAUMAN

Processor

Budget

Athlon 64 X2 4200+ Some say, "Buy a faster processor." Nonsense. Save some money here and put it in your videocard budget. But make sure you get the AM2 version (and motherboard) for future upgradability. **$180**

Sweet Spot

Intel Core 2 Duo E6600 This 2.4GHz model is an amazing performer for the price. It smokes a lot of the higher-end AMD CPUs in benchmarks; in the real world, eh… it's still faster. Best bang-for-your-buck processor, period. **$360**

Ultimate

Intel Core 2 Extreme X6800 Hail to the king, baby. This is the best a gamer can do: dual-cores, superb performance, high price, limited availability. Overclocks like mad, too. **$1150**

Video

Budget

GeForce 7900GS This represents the best value in videocard-dom, at least when you consider "normal" pricing. You can find some of the "sweet spot" cards on sale in this range from time to time, or even the last generation's high-end models (7800s, X1800s). **$200**

Sweet Spot

GeForce 7900GT/Radeon X1900 GT Both of these are faster than "budget" models but are in the $250-$300 range; you can also occasionally find special deals on 7900GTX or X1900XT models. **$260**

Ultimate

GeForce 7950GX2 Who doesn't want two videocards stuck together into one that fits into a single slot? If you want the absolute fastest single card in existence, here you go. **$520**

CHIPS & BITS

www.chipsbits.com

PC

World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade

World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade is the exciting new expansion to Blizzard's award-winning massively multiplayer online role-playing game. It expands the game by tremendous bounds, adding new races, lands, Battlegrounds, professions and items, and more.

$39.95

Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

In Dark Messiah of Might and Magic, players will be introduced to the world of Ashan, the new setting for all future Might & Magic games. Ashan is a dark and unforgiving world, scarred by a bloody history and threatened by an apocalyptic prophecy: the Dark Messiah.

$49.99

Neverwinter Nights 2

Neverwinter Nights 2 continues the tradition with an even deeper and more engrossing storyline, tremendously immersive character development, stunning graphics, and, an expansive multiplayer experience.

$49.95

Battlefield 2142

Battlefield 2142 will include a brand new game type to complement the classic conquest game. The epic, new Titan mode challenges gamers to destroy the opposing army's Titan - a massive, heavily armoured, flying warship - while defending their own.

$49.99

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent

As you infiltrate a terrorist organization in its American headquarters, you must carefully weigh the consequences of your actions. Do whatever it takes to complete your mission, but get out alive.

$49.99

ArchLord

The ArchLord system, which sees one player rise to become the game world's supreme ruler for a month, revolves around a player securing three holy relics known as Archons.

$49.95

Guild Wars Nightfall

Guild Wars Nightfall is the roleplaying game gamers have been waiting for – an intimate, heroic experience where your decisions shape your personal game experience and your customizable party becomes an extension of your character.

$49.99

Microsoft Flight Simulator X

Flight Simulator X delivers structured game play with more than 55 missions. The latest installment will include the usual genre leading realism that continues to awe real pilots and will serve as the graphical benchmark for games on Windows Vista.

$49.95

All Images For Display Purposes Only

XBOX 360

Star Trek: Legacy

Players become the Admiral of a task force of warships and must lead their fleet to victory in large-scale battles. As the Admiral of the Fleet you choose the ships, equipment, and captains that you will lead into battle.

$59.99

Forza Motorsport 2

With authentic simulation physics, bone-jarring damage, photo-realistic graphics, and licensed tuning and customization options, the franchise improves on the unprecedented features gamers enjoyed in its debut installment.

$59.99

Gears of War

Gears of War thrusts gamers into a deep and harrowing story of humankind's epic battle for survival against the Locust Horde, a nightmarish race of creatures that surface from the bowels of the planet.

$59.99

F.E.A.R.

F.E.A.R. (First Encounter Assault and Recon) is a first-person close-quarters combat game for the PC. The story begins when a paramilitary force infiltrates a multi-billion dollar aerospace compound, and the government responds by sending in Special Forces.

$59.99

Your Source for Games

PC • Xbox • Xbox 360 • PlayStation 2 • Nintendo GameCube • Nintendo DS • PSP • GBA and More!

PS2

Okami

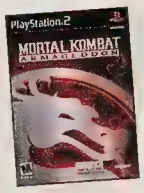
Playing as Ama Terasu, a sun god who takes on the form of a wolf, your goal is to bring life back to the world. Bringing life back to the world involves defeating lots of beasts. With each beast you defeat, the world's life force is restored just a bit, with colors and eventually people appearing.

$39.99

Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria

The valkyrie Silmeria once served Odin loyally, but after an incident ignited a conflict between them, Odin forcefully reincarnated her as a human. The spirit that should have been sealed has awakened—a situation Odin will not ignore for long.

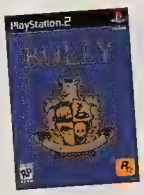
$49.99



Mortal Kombat: Armageddon

Introducing Mortal Kombat: Armageddon, with the most complete Mortal Kombat roster ever, including every character from the Mortal Kombat fighting universe, revolutionary Create-A-Fighter and Create-A-Fatality modes, plus a brand new Konquest mode.

$39.99



Bully

As a troublesome schoolboy, you'll laugh and cringe as you stand up to bullies, get picked on by teachers, play pranks on malicious kids, win or lose the girl, and ultimately learn to navigate the obstacles of the fictitious reform school, Bullworth Academy.

$39.99

Phantasy Star Universe

Phantasy Star Universe delivers a rich, ever evolving world and will provide hours of entertainment to both online and offline RPG enthusiasts.

$49.99

Final Fantasy XII

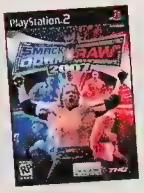
FINAL FANTASY XII carries on the tradition of gaming innovation, fantastic graphics, and epic storytelling.

$49.99

Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2

Combining action, fighting and light role-playing game (RPG) elements, Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2 will send players into a rich story mode that spans the entire Dragon Ball, DBZ, and Dragon Ball GT series.

$39.99



SmackDown! vs. RAW 2007

WWE SmackDown vs. Raw 2007 offers players unprecedented levels of choice and control. The #1 wrestling franchise in the world delivers the next generation of WWE video games with key new features, incredible graphics and engaging, highly realistic WWE action in and beyond the ring.

$49.99

All Images For Display Purposes Only

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent

As you infiltrate a terrorist organization in its American headquarters, you must carefully weigh the consequences of your actions. Do whatever it takes to complete your mission, but get out alive.

$59.99

Call of Duty 3

Call of Duty 3 delivers the intensity of being closer than ever to the fury of combat during the Normandy Breakout, the historic campaign that made the liberation of Paris possible and brought the Allies a step closer to Berlin.

$59.99

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

In this superhero-filled action-RPG, players assume the roles of more than 20 Marvel Super Heroes including Spider-Man, Wolverine, Blade and Captain America, and through their actions determine the fate of both planet Earth and the Marvel universe.

$59.99

FIFA 2007

FIFA 07 throws you into the rollercoaster ride of a football season. Employ real world tactics, make realistic decisions, and think like a player in order to win matches. An entirely new game engine will be included for the 360.

$59.99

Chips & Bits Inc., 65 Millet Street, Richmond, VT 05477
phone: 802.434.6682 • toll free: 800.699.4263 • fax: 802.329.2135

CHIPS & BITS

www.chipsbits.com

XBOX

Tony Hawk's Project 8

Tony rides again in the next Tony Hawk's Pro Skater game from Activision. The game challenges players to experience the intensity and pressure of skating against some of the world's top pros in true to life competitions as they aim to become the #1 skater.

$49.99

Reservoir Dogs

Based on the Quentin Tarantino flick, gamers are able to play all the key characters, including the infamous Mr. Blonde. Staying true to the original plot, this intense, third person shooter follows the progress and planning of the famed diamond heist.

$29.99

Superman Returns: The Videogame

In Superman Returns: The Videogame, you explore and protect the truly living city of Metropolis — one that is not only expansive (with 80 sq miles and over 9,000 buildings), but also changes dynamically with you as you affect gameplay.

$39.99

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07

This top-selling golf video game franchise is packed with new content, including 21 new courses and 50 golfers. In all-new Team Tour mode, assemble a team, improve team status, establish rivalries, and compete for the coveted EA Cup as you chase down Tiger Woods and company.

$39.99

College Hoops 2K7

Shoot for the Final Four with the 2007 entry in Visual Concepts' and 2K Sports' college b-ball game. Leadership makes a difference this year, as team chemistry plays a vital role in a team's performance.

$19.99

Need for Speed Carbon

What starts in the city is settled in the canyons as Need for Speed Carbon immerses you into the world's most dangerous and adrenaline-filled form of street racing.

$39.99

Family Guy

Players take on the role of multiple characters such as Stewie, Brian the Dog, and Peter, the hapless patriarch, as they interact with many of the citizens of Quahog.

$39.99

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

In this superhero-filled action-RPG, players assume the roles of more than 20 Marvel Super Heroes including Spider-Man, Wolverine, Blade and Captain America, and through their actions determine the fate of both planet Earth and the Marvel universe.

$39.99

All Images For Display Purposes Only

PSP

Tony Hawk's Project 8

Tony Hawk's Project 8 immerses players in the definitive skateboarding experience using ultra realistic graphics, enhanced physics, and extremely responsive controls that simulate the feeling of skating with every trick and bail.

$39.99

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas

"Sin City," the home of the famous Las Vegas Strip, flashy hotels, high-rolling casinos and world-famous celebrities, becomes the setting for a terrorist threat of global proportions. What happens when one of the world's most famous cities is held hostage by terrorists?

$39.99

Test Drive Unlimited

Test Drive Unlimited is the only game that immerses you into the car and bike enthusiast lifestyle, with total freedom to race however and wherever you want within a huge, online persistent environment.

$39.99

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo 2

Fireteam Bravo 2 ups the ante with a new Command Equity system, 10 new multiplayer maps, new multiplayer game types, enhanced cross-talk features with SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault, and a more open mission structure.

$39.99

Your Source for Games

PC • Xbox • Xbox 360 • PlayStation 2 • Nintendo GameCube • Nintendo DS • PSP • GBA and More!

GAMECUBE

FIFA 07

From the first whistle of the season to heartbreak of cup failure, FIFA 07 throws you into the rollercoaster ride of a football season, has your team got what it takes to win the league or will they bravely battle relegation - its all up to you.

$39.99

Legend of Zelda Twilight Princess

When an evil darkness enshrouds the land of Hyrule, a young farm boy named Link must awaken the hero - and the animal - within. When Link travels to the Twilight Realm, he transforms into a wolf and must scour the land with the help of a mysterious girl named Midna.

$49.99

Tomb Raider: Legend

Gaming's most famous heroine makes her triumphant return in Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend! Lara Croft travels the globe in search of an ancient artifact and is pitted against rival forces...

$29.99

Gamecube Color Game Screen

A portable compact design for use in vehicle or at home. The LCD TFT color monitor provides better game graphics than TV.

$79.99

Rechargeable Unlimited Wireless Controller

Low or dead battery? Plug in link cable & continue gaming. Save hundreds of dollars in batteries. Play up to 30 ft. away!

$29.99

Naruto: Clash of Ninja 2

All-new multi-player modes will engage players in frantic simultaneous four player battles and single-player modes will offer more gameplay choices than ever before.

$39.99

LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

LEGO Star Wars II follows the Rebel Alliance's battle to dismantle the Galactic Empire and rebuild a galaxy in pieces. The sequel finally allows you to build with your LEGO blocks, as a new Free Play mode allows gamers to customize the vehicles for new ship designs.

$39.99

Avatar: The Last Airbender

Based on Nickelodeon's show, fans will play as Aang, Katara, Sokka and Haru as they grow into an unstoppable team utilizing the kung fu-inspired bending arts through the Avatar universe.

$39.99

All Images For Display Purposes Only

Call of Duty 3

Call of Duty 3 brings players closer to the fury of combat as they fight through the Normandy Breakout in a unique shooting adventure for PSP that shows a second side to the events in the console game. Also featured is 4-player multiplayer.

$39.99

Brothers in Arms D-Day

Players will experience D-Day as a Screaming Eagle with more tactics and action exclusive to the PSP system. Now players can surprise the enemy for the ultimate advantage in firefights, leading a fire team throughout the entire Normandy campaign.

$39.99

Need For Speed Carbon: Own the City

Settle an ongoing turf war by building an unstoppable crew, winning races against your fiercest rivals, and outwitting the cops. How you choose and manage your crew will be the difference between victory and defeat. The city is yours for the taking with Need for Speed Carbon, the ultimate in handheld racing.

$39.99

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops features an original storyline that follows from the events of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater and boasts ground-breaking online play that lets gamers recruit comrades to form a unique fighting force.

$39.99

Chips & Bits Inc., 65 Millet Street, Richmond, VT 05477
phone: 802.434.6682 • toll free: 800.699.4263 • fax: 802.329.2135

427
420
1
438 +295
278 +43
126 +31
11/64
0 +12
0
0
0 +6
Sdkfz 251 Halftrack (1/1)
Alpha

427
230
+16
M3 Halftrack
r Attack!
Attack!

nforcements

The Thrilla in the Villa

Relic Entertainment's **Company of Heroes** reboots World War II BY TOM CHICK

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Genre World War II **Developer** Relic Entertainment
Publisher THQ **ESRB** Mature **Requirements** 1.6Ghz CPU; 512MB RAM

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Relic Entertainment has been working toward *Company of Heroes* for a while. The opening cinematic begins with their usual splash screen. It's a close-up of an underwater mine with the word "Relic" written on it. What's with that thing? Why does the developer of *Homeworld*, *Impossible Creatures*, and *Dawn of War* have an old World War II-era naval mine as its logo?

As the camera pulls back, an LCVP sweeps overhead toward Omaha Beach. It's carrying Allied soldiers, and you, into an intense tactical real-time strategy game. So that's the deal with the mine? Maybe Relic knew all along that this was where they were headed. Maybe that mine has been like a teaser, waiting off the coast of Normandy for *Company of Heroes* to start.

Given Relic's history, you could see this game coming. *Dawn of War* established the basic model: squad-based units, an economy directly related to map control, fearsome vehicles, detailed graphics, and absolutely killer sound design. *The Outfit*, a hybrid shooter/RTS, was a proof-of-concept for this cross-pollination of action and strategy. Ever since *Homeworld*, Relic's 3D engines have demonstrated they're capable of wrapping satisfying graphics around bold gameplay. Now it's all come together. And how.

Plenty of games have tried a tactical approach to World War II, but none have equalled *Company of Heroes*' heady sense of wrangling chaos. It most resembles Atomic's *Close Combat* games in how well it presents grognard stuff like flanking, cover, suppression, and combined arms. But it does all this in the context of real-time (sometimes overbearingly so) action. Like *Close Combat* in its day, this is a poster child for buzzwords like "visceral," "immersive," "cinematic," and "realistic-ish."

Still, *Company of Heroes* isn't letting the grognard stuff drive the game. There are mechanics that distinguish the Allies from the Axis as surely as it would be impossible to mistake the Terrans for the Protoss. During a match, each side chooses among its three "tech trees." These lead to special powers and rule tweaks that will be the stuff of hundred-page forum arguments about imbalance and realism. Similarly, each side's units are distinct. The Allies have a single type of riflemen, but the Axis soldiers come in three flavors, plus an officer. Allied paratroopers and their reinforcements can appear from midair. German Tiger tanks are veritable forces of nature. These differences generate a rich variety of early-, mid-, and late-game trumps and counter-trumps. There's an almost fastidious system at work here, a tactical puzzle that's often won in the figuring instead of the fighting.

[left to right] This probably isn't what the Allies had in mind when they requested a fire truck; Beware of blind corners; There's no need to go around a wall when a tank is leading the way. The tactical AI knows enough to take cover like this.

Not to say that there isn't a lot of busywork during a typical game. Call it either micromanagement or tactics, depending on how well you can keep up. *Company of Heroes* feels like an action game insofar as you have to throw the grenades, point machine guns in the right direction, and call in the air strikes. These things won't get done unless you do them. But while you're busy, an uncanny tactical AI can handle the details of where to stand and whom to shoot. Given the graphics and AI, it's easy to get wrapped up in watching the little details. Save those replays.

Believe it or not, World War II in Western Europe is exciting again. This is the place situated between "generic space dungeon" and "battle of Hoth" on the list of played-out settings. It's the same churches, hedgerows, haystacks, villas, and gutted towns you're seen a hundred times. But you've never seen—or played—them like this.

These locales are exciting now that Relic has made them as mutable and unpredictable as each side's tactical choices. The maps are alive with options for two reasons: 1) Everything is destructible and therefore temporary; and 2) You can easily change the flow of the map with demolitions (just blow up that bridge or building to keep the other guy from using it) and fortifications (lay free barbed wire and tank barricades; buy mines and bunkers).

Furthermore, the maps determine the progression of a game by the distribution of resources. Fuel depots mean more vehicles and quicker higher-end tech; manpower ensures plentiful infantry; munitions translate into heavy weapons upgrades and special attacks. Games unfold according to what's available. Those previously tired old places drive gameplay in ways unlike those of any other RTS or even action game. The church in Semois, the ridge overlooking the middle crossing at Vire, and those damnable/blessed hedgerows (it depends on what's on the other side) are once again worth fighting for.

The campaign is stitched together with a dry, earnest thread, complete with an old man reminiscing by way of narration. This "band of brothers in arms," this "company of heroes," these "men of valor" answering their calls of duty and winning their "medals of honor" and all that. At least it works better than the embarrassingly cartoon-y approach in *The Outfit*. But given that *Company of Heroes* is something special, if Relic wants to go all *Saving Private Ryan*, they can have at it. Consider this one of the few games that has actually, um, earned this approach.

The World War II theme is handled with a spirited regard for atmosphere and gameplay over realism and reverence. Soldiers cuss and bleed and writhe before dying. The Axis soldiers helpfully bark orders and complaints in accented English. The Allies reprimand Johnson for stealing doilies when they garrison a house, and they aren't above referring to the Germans as "Kraut fuckers" (although the line reading makes that sound like one who performs an action on Germans rather than an epithet about them). This one's for you, not the VFW.

There's a disappointing lack of QA that will hopefully be patched out by the time you read this. Even more disappointing are the omissions in the manual. Hey, Relic, Allies have supply and upkeep costs? When were you going to tell us about this? And what's the deal with healing? And don't you think it would have been worthwhile to clue us in about those helpful numbers indicating unit effectiveness? The interface is pretty good for the most part, which makes certain oversights even more aggravating. Again, this may all be a matter of patchwork, but until then, it can get in the way.

A few bumps in the road don't make this any less of a ride. This is where we've been wanting Relic to take us, and with *Company of Heroes*, the company has confirmed what many folks suspected after *Dawn of War*. This is a developer whose name belongs alongside Blizzard, Ensemble, and EALA (née Westwood) when it comes to real-time strategy games. ■

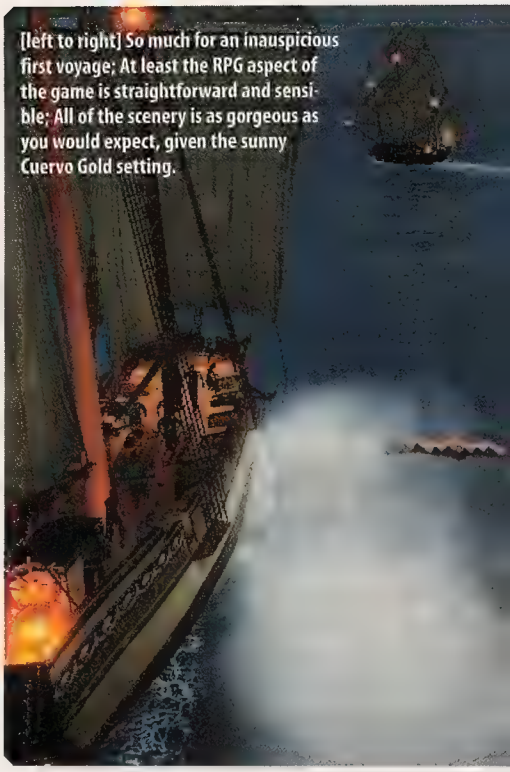
Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales

Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of aspirin

★ ½

Genre Ahoy Matey! **Developer** Akella
Publisher Playlogic/Atari **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 1.8GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales might better be called *Age of Pilates* considering all the contortions you have to go through to wring some entertainment out of this scourge of the seven seas. It tries to be the ultimate pirate game, but poorly ripping off equal parts of *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, *Sea Dogs*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean* actually adds up to nothing but a captain's mess. Much like Johnny Depp's swishy swashbuckler Captain Jack Sparrow, *Age of Pirates* keeps you guessing. Even though this is a busy RPG with quests spread over 16 islands, a range of player stats and abilities, ship-to-ship combat, and trading, everything is needlessly convoluted with unintelligible opening cinematics, a default control scheme as unwieldy as a flight sim, and a lack of tutorials.



[left to right] So much for an inauspicious first voyage; At least the RPG aspect of the game is straightforward and sensible; All of the scenery is as gorgeous as you would expect, given the sunny Cuervo Gold setting.

Because of this confusion, there is no way to immerse yourself in the game world other than running around towns and asking questions of passersby in the hope that they'll tell you what to do and give you a mission. And this is inexcusable. Even though the 17th-century Caribbean depicted here is a big, open-ended place with hundreds of available quests, ranging from trading slaves to killing pirates to signing on with a colonial power, this is still a straightforward adventure game with a simple story about a treasure map and a lost sibling.

After you do suss out what you're supposed to be doing and hit the waves, the game is incredibly aggravating and unbalanced. Ships flying the skull-and-crossbones roam the Caribbean waters like cops cruis-

ing for donut shops. So every time you venture out to sea to, say, acquire slaves in Martinique, you get gooned by speedy pirate fleets and wind up fighting long battles or tediously fleeing from them manually. Sure, this is the age of pirates and all, but this incessant random combat bogs the game down. Making matters even worse, you're big-time outgunned by most foes during the first half-dozen hours of play and, as a result, constantly forced to run. Attacks get even more numerous later in the game, as you make enemies while the plot moves along and eventually find yourself in the crosshairs of not only the pirates but also the English, Dutch, and Spanish. Yo-ho-ho, indeed.

Travel on the high seas is terribly implemented in other ways as well. Random storms blow up out of nowhere and can sink you in a minute or two. The artificial intelligence must have been programmed by a land lubber, since computer vessels constantly run aground. You can actually sink an entire pirate fleet by heading to an island and circling it closely until your pursuers dash themselves to splinters on the rocks.

Still, it's a shame that *Age of Pirates* has so many major flaws, because there is at least some treasure buried under the bewildering backdrop, brutal difficulty, and dumb AI. The RPG aspect of the game is well developed, with loads of options that let you build a personable pirate. A dozen upgradeable skills let you buff your hero every time you level up, both as a sailor (commander, navigator, cannons, etc.) and as a devil-may-care rogue (fencing, pistols, you get the picture). You also pick from scores of abilities that include such options as gunner (boosts your ships' firing rate), hard man (ups your personal health), and windcatcher (dials up acceleration at sea).

The game world looks and sounds fantastic, too. Each port is gorgeous (if a bit on the small side and same-y, with standard features in each one), and there are a lot of movie moments at sea with the sun rising in your sails or the moon shining over the swells. The only letdowns in this department are a lack of dialogue and music that pounds away even while you're engaged in such thrilling exploits as selling mahogany in an outpost store.

If you were to take *Age of Pirates: Tales of the Caribbean* back to the drawing board and graft on proper tutorials and introductory missions, while simultaneously lowering the number of random battles and enhancing the AI, you might be able to turn it into a great pirate RPG. In its present state, however, playing it is about as enjoyable as walking the plank in shark-infested waters.

–Brett Todd

TOP SELLERS

JULY 2006

1. **World of WarCraft**
   Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★★
2. **Cars: Radiator Springs Adventures**
   THQ Not Rated
3. **Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff**
   Electronic Arts Not Rated
4. **The Sims 2**
   Electronic Arts ★★★★★
5. **Sims 2: Open for Business**
   Electronic Arts ★★★★
6. **Guild Wars: Factions**
   NCSoft ★★★★
7. **Titan Quest**
   THQ ★★★½
8. **Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion**
   Bethesda ★★★★★
9. **Half-Life 2: Episode I**
   Valve ★★★
10. **Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection**
    Microsoft Not Rated
11. **Age of Empires III**
    Microsoft ★★★
12. **Sims 2 Nightlife**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★
13. **Zoo Tycoon 2**
    Microsoft ★★★★
14. **Civilization IV**
    2K Games ★★★★★
15. **WarCraft III Battle Chest**
    Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★½
16. **The Sims Complete Collection**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★½
17. **Civilization IV: Warlords**
    2K Games ★★★½
18. **Sims 2: University**
    Electronic Arts ★★★½
19. **Heroes of Might and Magic V**
    Ubisoft ★★★½
20. **Battle for Middle-earth II**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★½

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The July list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.

Flail, Caesar

[top to bottom] The Senate dwarfs almost everything outside the Circus Maximus; What's up with all those unhoused citizens? Spartacus!; Friends, Romans, countrymen… why do I look so pixellated?

"I come not to praise CivCity Rome, but to give it a resounding 'meh.'" BY AARON R. CONKLIN

★ ★ ½

Genre Stronghold, Sans Siege **Developer** Firaxis/Firefly **Publisher** 2K Games
ESRB Everyone 10+ **Requirements** 2GHz CPU; 512 MB RAM

Roman history is filled with instances of men who held the title of emperor at the same time. In almost every instance, the situation ended horribly, with poisonings, suicides, and/or soldiers sticking a sword in the kidneys of their once-esteemed leader.

Things aren't nearly as bloody or dire in *CivCity: Rome*, a standard-issue city-builder in which Firaxis (of *Civilization* series fame) and Firefly (of *Stronghold* series fame) nominally share development and direction. Sid Meier's name may appear in the credits, but the *Civilization* elements—tech trees barer than a winter forest in Britannia, dialogue-window cameos by historical superstars—are so faint, they might as well not even be here. The result is a big old *caveat emptor*.

"With a broader vision and scope, CivCity could have lived up to the grandeur of the city it's evoking."

In the city-building genre, all roads seem to lead to Rome these days (see the forthcoming *Caesar IV* and the recent *Glory of the Roman Empire* for other examples). In *CivCity*, you start the single-player campaign mode as a lowly governor charged with building a settlement and supplying the Senate with stone. Assuming you meet the mission goals and manage the wildly fluctuating happiness meter that gauges the insatiable needs of your citizens, you bop to other cities across the Empire. In all cases, you build an economy by throwing up farms and stores, laying down roads, and basically juggling all the things you've done in every other city-builder since Impressions perfected the formula with the *Caesar* and *Pharaoh* series in the late '90s. Or, more relevantly, you do the same kinds of things you did in Firefly's *Stronghold*, minus the siege and combat parts of that game.

By failing to evolve the gameplay beyond everything that's come before, Firefly has created an experience that's like running into the mummy you encountered on the annual field trip to the museum in sixth grade: briefly interesting but ultimately uninspiring. It's difficult to escape the sense that, with a broader vision and scope, *CivCity* could have lived up to the grandeur of the city it's evoking.

After all, anyone who's watched even a scene or two from *Gladiator* knows Rome was a vast, complicated city. In *CivCity*, your mission goals are depressingly plebeian and never particularly challenging. Sell a certain amount of wine, develop your housing units, stage a circus or two, and your esteem in the eyes of the Senate will soar. The game is at its most Augustan when it comes to bottling that special Roman flavor. The Senate and Coliseum are impressive, as are the Library of Alexandria and the other handful of Wonders you can erect. Just as it was in *Stronghold*, it's amusing to watch the citizens doing their thing: teeny gladiators hacking each other to bits, farmers harvesting wheat and grapes, tunic-clad Senators bloviating just about everywhere.

If only it looked half as majestic. The Romans in *CivCity* may have mastered road-building and aqueduct chains, but graphical excellence has utterly eluded them. Even at the highest settings, this game looks dull and dated. For its time, the original *Stronghold* looked sharper than this. From time to time, advisers will pop into your dialogue window in embarrassingly grainy videos to tell you that unsolved murders and plots against the Emperor are unsettling your citizens, but there's never anything you can do about it, and the political intrigue never seems to have any discernable effect on your citizens' happiness. What's the point?

At least the proceedings are mildly educational. Play for long enough, and you'll learn a fair amount about history's greatest empire. For instance, how quickly population control can derail the Roman way. Even the worst urban design disasters attract ridiculous numbers of rabble, from immigrants and unhoused citizens to vagrants, who don't ever seem to show up on-screen but can weigh on your city's civ and happiness ratings like a concrete albatross.

No wonder the actual Romans threw up walls. ■

Dungeon Siege II: Broken World

Apocalypse Aranna

★ ★ ★

Genre Corridor Clickery
Developer Gas Powered Games **Publisher** 2K Games
Requirements Dungeon Siege II **ESRB** Teen

If you missed it—and you probably did—*Dungeon Siege II* was the actualization of the promise that the original *Dungeon Siege* never quite fulfilled. It was a party-driven tactical click-and-loot packed with tightly scripted encounters and an engaging, if predictable, fantasy plot. Adding talent trees, "super" attacks, interparty banter, and an even better user interface experience, the sequel was a fit and absorbing sequence of hacking and slashing, right up to the cliffhanger ending.

Despite lackluster sales and a move to a new publisher, Gas Powered Games delivered the promised expansion, subtitled *Broken World*. At the end of the original campaign, your party's mysterious advisor decided to drop a little *deus* into the old *machina*, and now he's found himself all Foozled up for the game's finale. He's managed to trash Aranna along the way, reducing the lush jungles and rolling deserts to ashen wastelands punctuated by dire crevasses and splintered outcroppings. Your old foes have been gruesomely disfigured by the Clive Barker–esque Familiars, a race of demonic surgeons under the Foozle's command, who also provide some of the most difficult boss fights in recent memory.

The trouble is, those boss fights get rehashed a lot en route to the climax, and the final battle is possibly the most irritating hit point sink (160,000 of 'em) ever. A few imaginative battles and themes get repeated over and over, and each act eventually degenerates into a sort of tedious déjà vu. The level design itself is missing the ingenuity of the original campaign, and the linear corridors that compose each area lack much in the way of secrets or alternative routes. The last map is a dull abomination of an experience, with a single long hallway separated by repeating rooms packed with foes. It seems like a terrible cop-out, and the stark contrast with the elegantly designed dungeons seen previously makes you wonder if

Starstruck

Everyone has an opinion on the games they've played, and some post reviews on websites. Since no on trusts the press, here are some "real gamer" views of some recent releases, in their words, with their own unique interpretations of the English language.

CivCity: Rome

"Boo Sid, boo. You could've produced this bad Caesar 3 ripoff and called it anything, but you called it "CivCity", and even put a tiny Civilopedia in it. Haven't you got enough money? The Civ series is brilliant. Don't cash it in." ★

Dungeon Siege II: Broken World

"I already was in love with Dungeon Siege II, now the expansion pack has a lot more to offer! It has a catchy gameplay , its not too hard but it takes much minutes before you can and know everything." ★★★★

Madden NFL 07

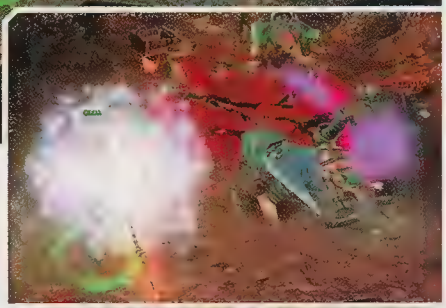
"I really don't like the exclusive license. The features in last years game and this year is pretty small compared to before the license. It is still a good Madden game, and well worth a purchase though." ★★★★

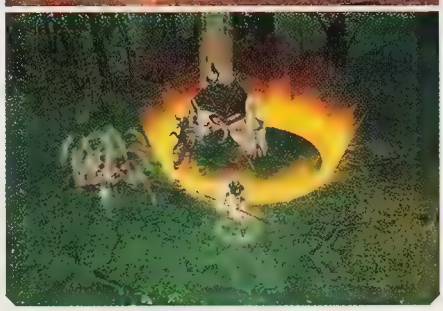
Sword of the Stars

"Save your money for something else I really thought it would have some type of storyline with it but it doesn't. Conclusion: this game is a blackhole." ★

Terra Wars

"The AI is suffering of alzheimer's, the graphic is old n lame, but still, the game is still playable (Sort of). You can play this game on a low end graphic-card, so put it in your desktop-pc and take it with you on your next business trip." ★★★





It may not have the polygons of Titan Quest, but the spell effects are still top drawer.

you're playing a poorly done mod rather than an official expansion. Scripted ambushes and trickier enemy formations help give it some color, but there's very little challenge that isn't based on packing baddies with multi-thousand hit point counts.

The two new hybrid classes are a welcome addition; it's worth coughing up the gold pieces to re-spec an imported character to become one. The Blood Assassin merges combat magic and ranged skills to create a damage-over-time monster of a class, with specialized "marks" that cause various wounds and effects to those foes struck by any weapon fired or thrown by the character. The Fist of Stone, by contrast, combines melee skills and nature magic to create an unstoppable self-buffing tank. It's a much-needed class for multiplayer games, since the standard melee class's shield talents weren't so hot. There are quite a few new armor sets, and a new system of "recipes" allows you to create high-powered weapons and gear out of collected reagents.

The game remains one of the best multiplayer hack-and-slash experiences out there, despite the less-than-stellar level design and tedious boss encounters in the expansion. If you haven't had a chance to play *Dungeon Siege II* networked, it's highly recommended. The slower pace and pathway-styled levels make it easier for the party to stay together and execute group tactics. (Plus, there's nothing quite like having everyone fire off their super attacks at the same time.) Pre-generated level 39 characters are provided for those folks who want to dive into the expansion without completing the original, of course.

It's difficult not to recommend *Broken World* to those who have *Dungeon Siege II*, simply because the two new classes (plus all of the additional loot) add a great excuse to revisit the sterling original quest and its almost peerless level design. However, it's sad that the finale is such a ham-fisted affair. Despite dated graphics, the game is still a bit of a looker, and the special effects are more visceral and satisfying than those found in comparable games. The whole package is worth the money of any hack-and-slash fan who hasn't played *Dungeon Siege II*, but it's a shame that Gas Powered Games didn't close this installment in better style. **–Douglas Erickson**

revisionist history

By Steve Bauman

Carmageddon

Who can't forget their first vehicular disembowelment? Mine took place in 1997. The world was different back then. We turned people into bloody smears on the pavement in our games, and we liked it. A lot. No one told us doing so would turn us into homicidal maniacs, though we probably suspected it would.

Back up one year. I visited England in 1996 to see two games from publisher SCi. The company was mostly pushing a game called *Gender Wars*, a cute but ultimately forgettable *Syndicate* clone that pitted men against women in a dystopian future. The other game was much more interesting. Seeing it required a ferry ride to the Isle of Wight, where developer Strainless Software had set up shop. After a few minutes of play, I was hooked.

"The over-the-top violence and amoral gameplay of Carmageddon would make Jack Thompson's head explode."

The game in question was *Carmageddon*, or "Hole Hedge," as it was inexplicably called in Israel. It's hard to imagine a game like it could exist today. Its over-the-top violence and amoral gameplay would make Jack Thompson's head explode. Its look and feel were obviously inspired by the 1975 Roger Corman B-movie classic *Death Race 2000* ("In the Year 2000, Hit and Run Driving Is No Longer a Felony. It's the National Sport!"). According to the Internet Movie Database, Corman wrote the original treatment for the movie, which he found "kind of vile." So he turned it into a black comedy, an approach shared by the game.

Carmageddon is a race game where the racing isn't that interesting. Passing through checkpoints and by opponents is a means to an end. The end, in this case, is doing the most horrible and graphic carnage imaginable to other drivers and to the hundreds of pedestrians wandering around each of the enormous driving areas.

Carmageddon was best played as an open-ended carnage simulator. You'd race for a bit, get way ahead, and then go nuts looking for strange power-ups and new and interesting ways to kill people. Consider some of the power-ups: Electro Bastard Ray, Mine Shitting Ability, Bouncy Bouncy, Oil Slicks From Your Arse, Oh Dear! Bodywork Thrashed!, ACME Damage Magnifier, and Jelly Suspension. You'd get style points for sliding into a pedestrian (a "Cunning Stunt" bonus… mature it was not).

Carmageddon 2: Carpocalypse Now, released a year later, was even more graphic. It replaced the original's crappy-looking bitmapped pedestrians with polygonal ones, allowing the poor saps to be animated and ripped apart in even more amusing ways. If they weren't being blasted into tiny bits from a normal collision, they were dropping to their knees and begging for their lives before you piledrived them into a wall. (Some versions of the game replaced the humans with zombies that spewed green blood, making it a sort of "Dead Rising GT.")

The technical sophistication of *Carmageddon* shouldn't be overlooked. Its damage modeling, collision detection, and physics were off the charts. (If you want to see it in action, check out this video on YouTube, unfortunately scored to Limp Bizkit's "Break Stuff": youtube.com/watch?v=P1dUPkk6vOk.) Not only was all damage modeled on the cars—to the point where one could be bent in half and drive in circles—but the pieces could also do damage to others. There was nothing more gratifying than nailing a pedestrian with a door or a fender that was about to fall off your car.

Carmageddon encouraged your inner sociopath, and that alone made it noteworthy. But its open-ended gameplay isn't emulated that often, because it's hard to do right, and things don't always work as expected. The results are unpredictable, driven largely by physics instead of scripted events and canned AI. *Carmageddon* pushed the limits of good taste, but I'll always remember it as a showcase of the pure joy that can be had with unscripted, physics-driven gameplay. ■

Racing for the Self-absorbed

Forget about the cars in the excellent **Evolution GT**; it's all about you.

BY DAVID J. LONG

★ ★ ★ ★

Genre Driver's Ed **Developer** Milestone **Publisher** Black Bean Games **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Throw a dart at the console or PC shelves of your local game store and you're bound to hit a racing game. One features exotic cars with price tags so high you'll never drive the real thing. Another has purpose-built race cars of all shapes and sizes racing on ovals, road courses, dirt tracks, and even off road. You can often tweak them, tune them, or reshape them with new parts. It's always about the car. Your goal is to earn something else to drive. *Evolution GT* is different from those games. It's a driving game about drivers.

More of a caRPG than most games called caRPGs, *Evolution GT* has you build yourself a driver. With experience points earned through racing, you improve your braking ability, acceleration, drafting skills, anticipation, and aggressiveness. As your stats increase, you tailor this alter-ego to your driving. If you make a lot of mistakes, pumping points into enhancement of the Tiger Effect allows you to rewind time and retry that corner you just screwed up. It's a superb feature for the novice, showing you instantly why correct braking and proper turn-in put you on the apex. More experienced drivers can instead put points into Concentration, making it harder for them to get rattled by drivers on their tail.

When you get close enough to someone, a meter starts depleting over their car. When it hits zero, the AI car begins to wobble. Do it on a straight and there's little effect, other than a slight loss of speed. Manage it right before a corner, and they might completely screw up. It's a heavy-handed way to show the pressure of being hounded by a faster driver, but it succeeds brilliantly at making you drive faster and harder to keep anyone from getting too close to your own car. You brake later and get back on the throttle quicker because when your own meter hits zero, it becomes very difficult to see. A blurring effect that

[top left] Smashed while approaching the famed corkscrew. [top right] Concentration loss in action. Stay far ahead so this doesn't happen to you. [middle right] Using Tiger Effect to rewind and better the corner. [above] Bumper cam drafting for the win.

lasts for about three seconds conveys the pressure you're under, often causing you to make a mistake. (If you've invested enough in Tiger Effect, you can rewind and potentially avoid the blunder.) All these visual cues do a tremendous job of translating the intangible excitement of racing into something more concrete. It shifts the emphasis squarely to the driving, and isn't that really the point of racing games? To race?

The cars aren't an afterthought. You contest each race with iron from manufacturers like Audi, Opel, Alfa Romeo, and Chevrolet. These offer a wide range of capabilities. At the high end are pure-bred race-car versions of the Corvette and Audi A4. Supercars like the Pagani Zonda and Bugatti EB110 add the exotic to the mix, while the Volkswagen Golf and Audi A3 fill out the lower end of the scale. The cars aren't tunable or upgradeable, but the handling, acceleration, and braking power of each are believable. Your car also suffers damage visibly and on an on-screen meter. When that gets depleted, it ends your race. Podium finishes unlock new races and cars, as well as driver gear to improve your stats. It's all balanced nicely to reward aggressive but clean driving. You get maximum points for setting fast times, leading races, passing everyone with intimidation, and driving cleanly. Optimal rewards hammer home the importance of being a better driver, no matter what car or circuit you have to deal with.

Circuits round it all out. Beautiful real tracks like the always entertaining—and difficult—Laguna Seca, Donington, and Hockenheim are mixed with fictional, appealing, and well-designed circuits in Berlin, London, and more. Step outside the career mode to practice or quick race these circuits with any of your unlocked cars. All races are run with cars of the exact same type, keeping competition close and driver ability paramount. The game only gets dragged down somewhat by mediocre sound and a poor, video-based introduction. The concepts in the intro are sound, and they're the driving force behind the design of the game, but touring car ace Gabriele Tarquini does a terrible job with the presentation. If you can force yourself to listen and absorb it, your appreciation for *Evolution GT* will be that much greater. ■

Look what I found!

Madden NFL 07

New frills, familiar hype, same old game

★ ★ ★

Genre Smashmouth Football
Developer/Publisher EA Sports **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 256MB RAM

What's the gimmick this year? It's hard not to be jaded about *Madden NFL 07*, because EA Sports picks one new frill to plug every year. That's what you get when your senior-citizen franchise is so well established that the only other option for a PR campaign is "Same as last year, only prettier."

Most of the time, these hyped features don't amount to much. This year's additions of lead-blocker controls and a Highlight Stick, (so running backs can juke and spin just like their real-life counterparts) add as little to the core game as last year's QB vision cones, or the right-analog Hit Stick from the year before. That said, both the lead-blocker system and Highlight Stick do jazz up the running game somewhat, though you need to have some talented thumbs to take advantage of either option. Every new iteration of *Madden* seems to add to the gulf separating the old-timers who've been playing this series since George Bush, Sr., was in the White House from the younger set weaned on hyper-fast arcade gaming, and these new features are no exception.

Blocking for running backs is particularly tough to handle effectively. Since lame computer blocking has long been one of the most frustrating aspects of running a

Master blocking and the highlight stick and you can cover a lot of ground on HB sweeps.

ground game in *Madden*, it's still a definite plus to be able to take over the OL fat guy of your choice. But you have to be awfully coordinated to be effective, because you need to make cut blocks and the like with the right analog stick and then immediately switch back to the RB using the left analog stick. Multitasking isn't easy when you've got 300-pound linemen looming over you.

Highlight Stick is easier to use, as it is meant for those moments after you've gained a bit of daylight beyond the line of scrimmage. It's also a lot of fun, simply because of the coolness factor in making the likes of Tiki Barber, Julius Jones, and cover-star Shaun Alexander dance and juke their way to an extra five or ten yards, or maybe spin their way totally into the open for six.

Still, adding a new arcade-style control option isn't exactly revolutionary. And the Highlight Stick makes gameplay feel more than a tad gimmicky. There doesn't seem to be any noticeable punishment for attempting even the most high-stepping maneuvers over and over again, either. Without the greater possibility of a fumble, there's a real temptation to try it on every running play.

Other than that, *Madden 07* is a pleasant retread. As with most editions, the new boss is basically the same as the old boss. EA has revamped Superstar mode with RPG-style character options that let you assume different roles, such as a Brett Favre–style Field General or a tantrum-throwing Team Distraction (hi, Terrell!), and earn points toward a berth in the Hall of Fame. It's still beyond goofy, with its side jaunts into answering interview questions and reading for movie roles.

Everything else is pretty much exactly as it was last year. The graphics are gorgeous, with photo-realistic players and helmets that glisten more like the diamond in a bluesman's tooth than plain old plastic. Both Al Michaels and John Madden do a good job with the commentary, and the soundtrack again features an eclectic mix of classic tunes from NFL Films and new alt-rock.

Basically, buying a new *Madden* game these days is more like a traditional rite of fall than a great gaming experience. That factor alone inoculates the franchise against critics, and it has to be admitted that just about every recent edition of the series plays a solid game of arcade football. Still, it's hard to escape the mild letdown of discovering, yet again, that this year's *Madden* is a lot like last year's *Madden*. **–Brett Todd**

[above] Is it Burnout or FlatOut? You decide. [below] Score! Yes, the stunt mode is weird.

FlatOut 2

Don't crash the car tonight

★ ★ ★

Genre Crashy Racing **Developer** Bugbear
Publisher Empire Interactive **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 2GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

FlatOut 2 has everything you want in a top-notch arcade racing game. It runs fast, delivering a superb sensation of speed. It looks terrific, running at high frame rates even at high resolutions. It has a large amount of content, with plenty of tracks, a bizarre stunt mode, online multiplayer, and a full-blown career mode. And it has crashes. Lots of crashes. Cars break into pieces, debris litters the tracks, and you can take out most parts of a city. If you hit something hard enough, you can even launch your driver through the windshield (a requirement in some of the whacked-out stunts).

What *FlatOut 2* doesn't have is the feel of some of the better race games. There's no sense of connection with your vehicle and the ground, because the physics is too slick, as if you're driving on freshly polished linoleum. It's not like you expect Papyrus-level physics here; there's no feeling of weight transfer or momentum. It's as if you're moving a car-shaped object through the world, and a race car feels like a junker, which feels like a school bus.

The dings on the handling could be found in the original *FlatOut* too, and they're all that's keeping the series from taking it to the next level. *Burnout* has crappy handling, too, but it has the awesome crash mode to compensate. The stunt mode in *FlatOut 2* doesn't come close to equaling that mode, even when it's played online against other people (though it ramps up the dumb in a good way).

FlatOut 2 is close to delivering *Burnout* on the PC. If anything, maybe it's too close. It's adopted the typically annoying Electronic Arts–styled interface, licensed music and all; where the previous *FlatOut* was a bit grungier, this one is candy-colored. Since we're talking about a game that's more about crashing than flash, it could use more grit and dirt. And better physics. **–Steve Bauman**

YOUR OTHER SYSTEMS BY TOM CHICK

[top] Dead Rising [above] Disgaea 2

Dead Rising isn't just an awesome next-gen zombie-killing sandbox set in a mall with conveniently placed lawnmowers, chainsaws, hedge trimmers, excavators, and battle axes. It's one of only four games that truly qualify as "horror." Most putative horror games are just themed action games. *Painkiller* and the original *Blood* are both superlative, but they're actually shooters under horror-colored sheets. They offer no more sense of fear than you'd get in a typical shooter with bad lighting.

The only games that truly qualify as horror are *Alone in the Dark*, *Silent Hill*, and *Fatal Frame*. They're all built to evoke an emotional response: Namely, a sense of dread that's not possible in a game about being armed to the teeth.

And now there's *Dead Rising* to join that rarified company. Since it's a game about a zombie apocalypse, there's enough gore and violence to sustain two or three typical action games. And since it's on the 360, the zombies arrive in mobs that weren't possible on last-gen systems.

Dead Rising opens with its own version of *Half-Life's* tram ride, which at times looks uncomfortably like footage of the L.A. riots. The theme, of course, is that you're a bystander to man's inhumanity to man, but you can substitute the word "zombie" for either occurrence of the word "man." And then you're dropped in the middle of it, where you'll discover that physics-based zombie killing is really the best thing you could ever hope to do with the Havoc engine.

What makes *Dead Rising* work so well, and how it really earns its "horror" badge, is with the save game system (which is, ironically, the same feature that has earnest reviewers fastidiously dropping points from their ratings). You can only save at certain locations, and it's entirely possible to fail not only individual missions but the story as a whole. Zombie apocalypses rarely end well. *Dead Rising* isn't telling a scripted story so much as offering a series of outcomes and challenging you to work your way to the best one. It's built to encourage you to try again. The same developers took a similar approach in the overlooked *Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter*.

So the question you have to ask yourself is this: Do you want a game to entertain you with a minimum of fuss, or do you want it to deliver an experience? There's no right answer, but for those of you who prefer the latter, *Dead Rising* is one of the best—and only—horror games you'll ever play. For everyone else, there's still plenty of gratifying zombie smashing.

Disgaea 2 is a classic example of the uniquely Japanese treats you get on your PlayStation 2 while everyone else is playing the latest gee-whiz-bang next-gen 360 hit. This sequel is hotly anticipated among the handful of gaming elite who actually finished the first *Disgaea*, a tactical RPG of epic number-crunching proportions that could easily take 30–40 hours to complete.

There's not much you can say about the sequel that hasn't already been said about the original. Think of it as a 30-hour extension, but starting over with new characters. There are some successful attempts to make the random worlds more interesting, and a new criminal system to provide an incentive for the development of individual characters.

The appeal of *Disgaea* is its honesty. The point here isn't the story or the characters or the skills or the inventory items. They're all peripheral. The point is to work your way up a bare leveling grind, at your own pace and according to your own character choices. Each battle is a resource, to be solved like a tactical puzzle and mined for experience. If you liked the first *Disgaea*…well, you know the drill. ■

Failure To Thrust

The interface-impaired Sword of the Stars puts the lax back in galaxy

BY KELLY WAND

★ ★

Genre 4X Space Empire Thing **Developer** Kerberos Productions **Publisher** Lighthouse Interactive
ESRB E10+ **Requirements** 1GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

Its name makes it sound like the sequel to *Galaxina*, but *Sword of the Stars* actually has all the makings of a 4X classic about warring space fleets. (A 4X game, for the acronym-impaired, is one that involves expanding, exploring, exploiting, and exterminating.) The battle graphics and flourishes of comic-book art revel in their datedness. Meanwhile, the diplomacy and economic management stuff, widely regarded as a staple of the genre, has been cheerfully chucked over the side, along with anything else that doesn't involve building fleets and conquering other fleets with them, or colonizing systems and terraforming planets to use as staging areas for said conquests.

Sword of the Stars features four factions: the eternally bread-and-butter humans, the insect-like Hivers, the reptilian Tarkas, and the Liir, who are a bit reminiscent of David Brin's starfaring dolphins from *Startide Rising*. All races make the same types of destroyers, cruisers, and dreadnaughts; these are created by mixing and matching various ship drives, weapons, and armor to produce an endless series of variations (or to make upgrading your entire fleet more complicated, depending on your reverence for minutiae). Each race comes with carefully play-balanced advantages and disadvantages: The Tarka ships are hardier, while the Liir enjoy a slight research edge, and the Hive tends to, you know, "swarm."

Each also uses a unique method of propulsion. Humans shuttle from system to system using predetermined, and sometimes circuitous, "node lines." The slower-moving Hiver ships can deploy "gates" that allow for instant travel between distant systems—the trick being, of course, to get them there by bringing along enough fuel tankers and armored escorts to repel the enemies who will regard them as plum targets en route. In an interesting twist, players are randomly denied certain techs at the start of each game, although the names and the screens are the same. In many ways, this is all a curious step backward from something like *Homeworld Cataclysm*.

Since *Sword of the Stars* is putatively centered on space battling, combat should be the game's money shot. While the physics are impressive, and your ships slide and drift convincingly enough, it just doesn't feel like space. When enemy fleets engage, you're taken to a faux-3D real-time map that's really a flat 2D pane, usually in orbit around the planet under contention. Regardless of whether you're in deep space or in orbit, the arena always feels cramped. And there's simply no sense of epic scale, none of that nerve-wracking suspense à la *Homeworld*, as enemy fleets approached each other across vast distances before finally swooping in.

"Even two patches later, the game still feels unfinished, and in a blithely indifferent way."

There are no fighter-sized craft in *Sword of the Stars*, and they're missed. Even the ungainly cap ships feel tiny and respond sluggishly to your commands. Maddeningly, your ships enter battle in "hold fire" mode and need to be instructed to "close with the enemy," although it's hard to gauge whether they're even doing that at full capacity, since you're given so little in the way of hard info. It's nice that you can target individual ship components like swiveling turrets or engines, but battle decisions often feel abstracted and out of your hands. It's like you're watching someone else's replay. There's a "sensors" screen that shows you tiny plinking triangles squaring off in little wireframe waltzes, but you can't give orders from it. After brandishing a billion spaceship parts in your face—cloaking devices, missile launchers, mine-layers, sizzling heavy-beam

[left to right] These are the bayonets and laser guns that aren't in the game; Assault shuttles are what astrophysicists call dual-purpose: They're good at storming planets and even better at blowing up in transit from the missiles fired by the planetary defenders; Without the "Sensors" screen, how would you know exactly how far from Xheketchis you just died?

weapons in every color of the rainbow, reverse tractor beams to sling asteroids into enemy dreadnaughts or send them careening into planets to explode—it doesn't give you the skinny on any of them.

The baffling UI lapses sink the game. Navigating anywhere, whether in battle or on the star map or in the research screen, is a nuisance. You can't pan left or right by moving your mouse to the edges of the screen, or even with arrow keys (what else are they for?). You can't ESC from the main menu or toggle directly among research, build, and design screens, which you're accessing constantly in the beginning and with exponentially increasing frequency once you've conquered dozens of systems. Nothing feels scaled to accommodate the human eye. The fleets on the star map are miniscule, as are the techs in the research screen. You can rotate and pan a bit by holding down the right mouse, but jerkily. Ditto with zooming in and out.

Even two patches later, the game still feels unfinished, and in a blithely indifferent way. Why can't you build fleets directly from the strategic map? Why do you start out with the schematics for assault shuttles and extended range craft but need to add them manually at the start of every game? And why is the default setting for saved designs "ArmorMk2," "ArmorMk3," etc., instead of just blank? All four races wouldn't use that system, would they? The clutter levels soon reach critical mass, with dozens of massive fleets with "Mk" in their names racing around everywhere or lining the edges of a "fleet management" screen. When it reduced the supposed headaches of galactic infrastructure to a solitary "planetary development" slider, Kerberos picked up the slack by making fleet management into a wearisome bureaucracy.

Canoodling with the UI is all you have, though, because the game's miserly about info. Although you usually get a verbal cue on the turn you've researched something (and a sneaky camouflaged text message, if you remember to look), there's no prompt to queue up a new project or to tell you when ships are constructed or when they've arrived somewhere or how damaged they are from battle. No real galactic emperor would have to put up with that. There's no battle summary screen; no in-depth, in-game analysis of vessel classes or weapon counters; no sense of controlling the lives of billions of organisms beyond sterile, cryptic decimal points. For all the terraforming and colonizing, you don't really feel like an advanced race.

Kerberos has claimed that one of its goals for *Sword of the Stars* was to streamline and simplify the famously dense space-empire-strategy genre by eliminating "feature creep." But the UI it's concocted to showcase this grassroots philosophy is fertilizer, and this is one genre where the interface *is* the game. The inevitable galaxy of patches to come will surely help, but for now, the vacuum abides. ■

Cool Hot Stuff

Computer Games EDITOR'S CHOICE

Voodoo PC's liquid-cooled **Omen a:121** takes high-end performance to new high-endedness BY STEVE BAUMAN

★ ★ ★ ★ ½ **Manufacturer** Voodoo PC **MSRP** $7484

They say that if you have to ask how much something costs, you can't afford it. That's definitely true when you're talking about the highest-end game PCs. The amounts of cash people are willing to throw at machines in order to eke out 10-20% boosts over "standard" high-end one are kind of goofy, but what they get is kind of awesome, too.

Voodoo PC's liquid-cooled Omen a:121 is equally goofy and awesome. The price tag puts it squarely in the goofy camp—and in the "If you have to ask…" category. But everything else about the machine, from the "Sealed With a Hex" tape to the strange triangular boxes that hold its connectors, manuals, and a T-shirt, is pretty awesome. The Voodoo looks and feels different. And expensive. And fast.

So not only does the machine come with all sorts of high-end components (Core 2 Extreme CPU, two 512MB Radeon X1900XTX videocards, etc.), but they're all overclocked well beyond stock. The performance is off-the-charts good, though not without a few quirks. The review system arrived with a dead videocard. It showed one of the hazards of liquid cooling: Replacing a videocard becomes a pain in the ass. Normally, you would just yank out the old card and slap in a new one. With a liquid-cooled one, you need to remove six hex nuts to get the heatsink/coolant off the old card, remove the stock heatsink/fan from the replacement, and put the heatsink/coolant back on the new card. What's normally a five-minute task takes over an hour.

But there's a reason to suffer through the hassle of liquid cooling; it works extraordinarily well. The videocards were overclocked by 20% over the stock rates for memory and core but ran cooler than ones with normal cooling. The processor easily ran overclocked from 2.93GHz to 3.4GHz, also at a lower temperature than a standard air-cooled system. The system even booted to the Windows desktop at an insane 4.3GHz. (That was an accident; the system sort of ran fine at that speed, but benchmarks proved a bit flaky.)

So, while it's hard to rationalize the cost of a machine like this, it's impossible not to acknowledge how freaking cool it is. The Omen looks mean and nasty, with superior build quality and a rugged, aggressive style that matches its performance. (Love the polished chrome interior; seeing everything reflected through the side panel makes it look like your machine has four videocards and two CPUs.) And if spending over 1000 bucks on videocards alone doesn't make a lot of sense with Windows Vista and new DirectX 10 cards looming on the horizon, at least you can derive some comfort from knowing you have one of the fastest machines on the planet. For a while.

The Specs 2.93GHz Intel Core 2 Duo Extreme Processor overclocked to 3.4GHz; 2GB Corsair 8500C5 DDR2 RAM; two overclocked 512MB ATI Radeon X1900XTX videocards in Crossfire mode; Windows XP Professional; 750GB 7200RPM SATA drive; 16X Plextor DVD burner; Wireless/Ethernet; six USB 2.0; 5-in-1 card reader.

BENCHMARKS

PCMark05	
System	**7590**
CPU	**8176**
Memory	**6181**
Hard Drive	**5181**

3DMark 05	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**18291**	**17008**
1280×1024	**17355**	**15630**
1600×1200	**16243**	**14259**
1920×1200	**9260**	**7432**

F.E.A.R.	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**215**	**136**
1600×1200	**136**	**98**

3DMark 06	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**12025**	**10052**
1280×1024	**10673**	**8645**
1600×1200	**9436**	**7455**
1920×1200	**5177**	**3755**

Half-Life 2: Lost Coast	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**210**	**197**
1280×1024	**207**	**181**
1600×1200	**200**	**163**
1920×1200	**187**	**147**

HDA Xplosion 7.1 DTS Connect Auzen Tech/$139.99 ★ ★ ★ ½

This soundcard's big draw is support for seven, count 'em, seven speakers. It also supports DTS Connect and Dolby Digital Live, both of which turn any standard audio signal into multichannel sound. (In other words, your MP3s will play in all of your speakers for true surround music without requiring DVD 5.1 audio.) While it sounds terrific with music, it's not an ideal card for gaming. Some owners have reported problems with some games—specifically, *Age of Empires III*—though we were unable to reproduce those problems in our testing. It lacks support for EAX and has higher CPU utilization than the X-Fi. Still, if listening to music is your thing, and you have speakers all over your house, this is a good alternative to Creative's offering. **–Steve Bauman**

Barracuda HP-1 Razer/$129.99 ★ ★ ★ ★

Razer has carved out a nice niche with its mouse line and now is moving into game audio. Its Barracuda HP-1 headphones are terrific, with excellent multichannel output and a quality microphone. Their only flaw—and it's a big one—is a bulky inline volume controller that's wired too closely to the earpieces; you're practically forced to clip the thing to your collar, which looks stupid. The surround sound is convincing, or at least as convincing as it can be when the speakers are right next to your ears. Games tend to exaggerate positional audio so much, you can easily tell which direction sound is coming from with these headphones. But most importantly, they're extremely comfortable. It feels like you're placing fluffy pillows on your ears. You'll be thankful for that comfort after a marathon gaming session. **–Steve Bauman**

CASE MOD OF THE MONTH

Reader Kenneth Konarzewski Jr. sent in this home-brewed computer, though it appears someone flipped a lower-case D when they told him to create a "case mod." ***Have an interesting case mod of your own? Submit it to editor@cgonline.com.***

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: I don't really "get" benchmarking. What are the numbers supposed to mean? Why do you pick the programs you pick? What does something like *3DMark* tell me about my system?

–Teddy Martin

A: Benchmarking is the process of finding out how a system performs when running benchmarks. Taken at face value, the numbers don't mean a lot; they only matter in relation to other tests using that same benchmark.

To use one example, *3DMark* does a great job of telling you how *3DMark* performs on your system. (The same is true of tests with *F.E.A.R.* or *Half-Life 2*.) The number it spews out won't tell you how *World of WarCraft* will run, though.

Still, changes or differences between scores can give you an idea of how all games will perform. If our test system gets 4000 3DMarks and 50FPS in *Half-Life 2*, you can compare that with the 2500 and 30FPS you get with your own and figure you'll see similar boosts.

Q: If two machines have identical specs and neither is artificially enhanced (i.e., no overclocking), what accounts for any differences in benchmark scores? Shouldn't different systems with identical hardware perform the same?

–Gregory Radomisli

A: Some custom makers tweak the hardware a bit, but there are few variations between identically configured machines. An Athlon FX-60 is an Athlon FX-60 and a GeForce 7900GS is a 7900GS, whether it's in an Alienware or Voodoo PC box.

Which logically leads to the next question: "So why buy a boutique system?" If you're on a budget or a savvy hardware buyer, it's hard to justify the extra cost. But if you have the money and don't want the hassle of picking components, those companies deliver excellent build quality, better support (in most cases), and an extra dose of brand appeal.

Forget Me Not

Microsoft wakes up and remembers its other platform, readying Vista, new Windows hardware, and unleashing XNA Studio on students across the world BY STEVE BAUMAN

In case you've been spending the last few years getting Windows for Workgroups 3.11 to connect to the Internet, you may have heard that Microsoft is (finally) getting close to unleashing Windows Vista on the public. Though many hardcore gamers have already dismissed Vista as unnecessary—many said the same thing about Windows XP when it came out, claiming Windows 98SE was all they'd ever need—it does represent a change in thinking for Microsoft, at least when it comes to games. The company is now treating Vista as a game platform like the Xbox 360. Goodbye, Windows games. Hello, Games for Windows.

"We've been remiss in our status as platform holder in retail."

–Chris Donahue

"We've been remiss in our status as platform holder in retail," admits Chris Donahue, director of business development for Games for Windows. Expect "Games for Windows" sections in stores, special kiosks, and other treatments currently given to consoles. Windows Live will launch with Vista, providing a standardized multiplayer setup much like Xbox Live, and DirectX 10 and its videocards will (hopefully) standardize 3D hardware across all PC machines, desktops, and laptops.

While we're still putting versions of Vista through their paces, waiting for a true "Release Candidate" edition so we can do more than say, "Yeah, it looks pretty," Microsoft is readying some new Windows hardware and development tools to help remind people that Windows exists in an Xbox 360 world.

A Windows version of the Xbox 360 Wireless Controller is scheduled for release for the holidays at $69.95. Both it and its previously released wired cousin should help standardize gamepad configuration and control schemes under Vista (though both also work with XP). People who already have a 360 with a wireless controller will be able to buy the 2.4GHz USB dongle in the Xbox 360 aisle of their favorite store for $20.

Microsoft is also releasing two new mouse controllers. After everyone ignored its last "gamer" mouse, the Laser Mouse 6000, the company has gone in two different directions. The first mouse is actually a relaunched version of an old favorite, the Intellimouse Explorer 3.0. Launching for $39.95 in October, it's a throwback; it has "low sensitivity" relative to other gaming models today, but the shape and feel are what made it popular with many gamers.

The second mouse is for serious gaming. Microsoft has partnered with Razer on the $69.95 Habu. Scheduled for release in November, it shares its internals with Razer's 200DPI Copperhead mouse. It features a Microsoft-designed outer shell, intended for right-handed use, with seven buttons and blue lights. Its most interesting feature is a removable panel that lets you adjust the positioning of the side buttons.

Finally, Microsoft announced XNA Game Studio Express in August. It's a free, full-featured programming tool that lets you write noncommercial C# games for Windows. It's mostly for students, giving them a low-cost way to produce games. But, according to Microsoft's Scott Henson, director of platform strategy for the game group, both it and its professional version should help address a fundamental problem in the game industry: retention of talent. "It's hard making games," he says. "It wears people out, and tools like this help."

The bigger news is that, by the end of the year, the free XNA Studio will be able to compile games on the Xbox 360. It will require programmers and hobbyists to subscribe to a "creator's club" for $99/year. You'll be able to trade code with other people, but they'll need to compile it on their own to try it on their 360. (No such limitations exist for Windows versions; you can freely distribute executable files.) Expect Microsoft to make available select homebrewed titles via Xbox Live in the future.

See, Microsoft hasn't totally abandoned that poor Xbox 360. ■

Microsoft's $69.95 Habu shares its internals with Razer's 200DPI Copperhead mouse. Its most interesting feature is a removable panel that lets you adjust the positioning of the side buttons.

Conservative Competitor

Gateway's **FX510XT** delivers serious Core 2 Duo performance, but with some minor quirks

★ ★ ★ ★ **Manufacturer** Gateway **MSRP** $3999

If you want to get the most bang for your buck, it rarely makes sense to go with bleeding-edge technology. Technology moves so quickly that today's high-end machine will be outperformed by one at half the price six months down the road. On the plus side, if you splurge for the high-end machine you're less likely to need that "refreshening" when a newer, faster processor or videocard appears on the market.

Muddling this normal cycle is the release of Windows Vista and the new videocards that will support its all-new DirectX 10 for 3D graphics. This makes dropping $4000 on a machine like Gateway's FX510XT more of a dicey proposition than it would be normally, since it has nearly $1000 worth of videocards that may be lacking a few features in a few months. But here's the thing: There won't be any games requiring a DirectX 10 videocard for a while, so you're safe.

The Core 2 Extreme processor is the fastest available today, and two Radeon X1900XT cards deliver amazing 3D performance. There is, however, a bit of a quirk involving *3DMark* and the system. One test always failed in Crossfire mode; with a single card, it was fine, and there were no Crossfire-related problems with any other games. (ATI is aware of the issue, though it has been unable to replicate the problem. It seems to be limited to certain versions of Intel's 975 motherboards, specifically ones for system builders like Gateway and Dell. Sounds like a BIOS issue.)

The FX510XT comes with 4GB of RAM, which is overkill—today, at least (32-bit Windows XP will only see 3GB). The hard drive performance is off the charts, thanks to the RAID0 configuration of the two 500GB drives, which yields nearly 1TB of disk space. (That's a lot of… game storage space.)

While this Gateway is a bit boring looking for a machine in its price range, lacking some of the flash of the Dell XPSs of the world, don't let its conservative looks fool you: It's a serious performer at a competitive price. **–Steve Bauman**

The Specs 2.93GHz Intel Core 2 Duo Extreme Processor; 4GB PC5300 DDR2 RAM; 2 512MB ATI Radeon X1900XT videocards in Crossfire mode; Windows XP Media Center; 2 500GB 7200RPM SATA drive in RAID0; 16X DVD burner; 6 USB 2.0; 5-in-1 card reader.

BENCHMARKS

PCMark05	
System	**8190**
CPU	**7411**
Memory	**5690**
Hard Drive	**9011**

3DMark 05*	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**12115**	**10392**
1280×1024	**10712**	**8907**
1600×1200	**9461**	**7758**
1920×1200	**8816**	**7135**

3DMark 06*	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**7017**	**5715**
1280×1024	**6110**	**4806**
1600×1200	**5299**	**4074**
1920×1200	**4907**	**3599**

Half-Life 2: Lost Coast	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**188**	**178**
1280×1024	**186**	**165**
1600×1200	**174**	**139**
1920×1200	**170**	**137**

F.E.A.R.	No AA/AF	4X AA/8X AF
1024×768	**191**	**122**
1600×1200	**122**	**87**

*3DMark was run in single-card mode; see text for explanation.

road to nowhere

by Cindy Yans

Giving Aural

Live voice chat expands the whole perimeter of online gaming

A few weeks ago, I got kicked out of my (most-frequently-played) MMO guild. It was weird. I don't generally get kicked out of stuff—not since the eighth grade for purposely chain-hiccupping in detention. I'm positive that it was my resistance to ass-kissing that tagged me for the boot, but the thing I remember most about the whole episode, which still perplexes me to this day, is that the guild leader Moomeethra—a psychopathic chemistry teacher from another planet—told other guild members that one of the things I was guilty of was trying to have sex with her over Ventrilo (an external voice chat client). That was preposterous. I was flabbergasted. I still am.

I exited the guild along with a couple of friends, a Tank (also accused of Ventrilo sex-capades, except he's a guy) and a Warlock with a propensity for singing in voice chat very, very badly. Anyway, the Tank wasn't going to rest until he found the three of us another "home," and he very quickly did. One of the new guild's foremost requirements is that every member must have access to voice chat, not to cyber with psychopaths, but for efficiency in PvP. On a role-playing server, though, voice chat can get rather strange.

"The folks in live chat are kicking serious butt."

For example, what in text messaging reads, "Forsooth, thou hast ta'en the relic that rightfully belongs to Boroflaxifir the Heinous, for he is the one to whom we look for protection!" turns into "Dude, you ninja'd the damn war axe. Wha'dja do that for? It puts you DKP negative, man."

I mean, there's only one guy in my new guild that actually role-plays in voice chat and everyone thinks he's a fruitcake: "Didja hear Gregor's stilted use of auxiliary verbs? What a maroon."

"Yeah. I'll bet he LARPs too."

"Yeah, that's disturbing."

The first voice chat client I remember using with any frequency was Roger Wilco during my time in *EverQuest*. The quality was poor, the sound cut in and out, and it was really, really annoying. Now with Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, and the like, the quality is good, the sound is stable, and… it is really, really annoying. I know that when you're in a situation that requires lightning fast reaction time, either during PvP or in a particularly tricky PvE raid, it's much quicker to say "Oh shit! Behind you!" than it is to type it, but live voice removes a lot of the mystique. Our main raid leader is a cute, diminutive female Gnome who sounds a whole lot like Howard Cosell, when he was, er, alive. Similarly, the immense, hulking fighter guy is apparently played by a 12-year-old boy (or girl, it's tough to tell).

And yet, I can't imagine playing now without it. While voice-optional guilds are trying to make sure that clear communication is being fed into the chat window, the folks in live chat are kicking serious butt.

The whole thing is only going to become more prevalent as developers begin to incorporate voice chat directly into their game clients. While there are a number of entities that are eager to help them do this, the likeliest candidate seems to be Vivox, Inc. Born of the VoIP service Vonage, Vivox is working hard to streamline its technique for making MMO communication seamless and accessible from within the game world. CEO Bob Seaver and VP of product management and marketing Monty Sharma came to visit us a while back to demo voice implementation in two products: *Second Life* and *EVE Online*, and it was really impressive how many possibilities there are for this technology. In *Second Life*, you can walk through the world in "sound proximity zones," with conversations fading in and out from one zone to the next. You can make phone calls to outside lines, with anonymity. You can study Swahili.

In a game with more competitive tactics like *EVE*, players have the ability to form groups, sub-groups, set permissions—basically do everything you can do on a separate client, but right from within the game. Vivox also intends to solve the Falsetto Barbarian problem, with "voice font" technology. Xbox Live has voice morphing, but it's not even close to sophisticated enough to maintain the illusion of alternate personas. "You have to do a better job if you want a woman to sound like a man, and there is technology out there that will help us do that, but we're still in the evaluation stages," says Seaver.

I imagine that a lot of companies will want to leave this sort of implementation to internal development, but the real expertise seems to lie with telecommunication pros who've been around the block. *Auto Assault*, for example, could have really used Vivox on its side. I look forward to the day when a Gnome will sound like you'd imagine a Gnome sounding, a Barbarian will sound at least post pubescent, and the Warlock will be able to carry a tune, the latter of which I'm really not counting on. ■

MOBS & FRIENDS

The August 22nd patch to *World of WarCraft* created a wee-bit of server instability, as shown here. Hundreds of people fell through the game world, died, and ended up in a single pile. It's kind of pretty, though not to the people that, as a result, couldn't recover their corpses.

MMOCABULARY

Glass Cannon This is a term that usually refers to a spellcaster but can apply to any fragile yet potentially powerful class. For better game balance, Mage types are often purposely designed as glass cannons, in that they can deliver substantial damage but cannot survive many attacks themselves.

Joust A technique usually associated with high-level PvE encounters where a raid boss has a highly damaging Area of Effect attack. A group very carefully times a sequence in which it pauses and retreats to a safe distance during the mob's attack, then rushes back in range when the AoE effect has subsided. This requires substantial coordination and often voice communications to be effective.

IBTL In Before the Lock (sometimes just IBL for In Before Lock). Used in many forum posts when the content or tone of a thread has gotten out of hand enough to incur the wrath of a moderator. Its usage indicates that the poster recognizes he's being inflammatory but wants to "create a scene" anyway. Inherently useless, it has nonetheless become a part of nearly all MMO community discussion boards.

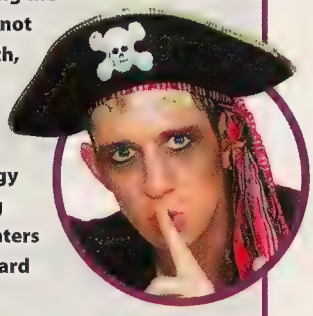
IFL2P It's Fine, Learn To Play—an evolution of "Cry more, noOb," with the same meaning. Used to disparage comments or criticism about the game or a game system, it implies both greater skill and knowledge on the part of the responding poster and ignorance and incompetence on the part of the original poster. Often used by players whose character class is overpowered, as they desperately try to stave off the dreaded nerf.

Out of Combat Rezzer In many raid situations, it is useful to have one healer with resurrection capability sit out or even drop group during a big fight. This allows the raid the chance to recover from a wipe, as the out of combat rezzer does not gain aggro from the target mob and can thus resurrect the rest of the raid.

MMOBYTES

Dark Age of Camelot should have suffered a swift and painless death and been swept under the rug when Warhammer Online made such a flashy appearance, right? Nope. EA/Mythic is offering up a new expansion for its well-loved MMO's fifth anniversary. Labyrinth of the Minotaur introduces the first new playable race to the Realms in two years: the Minotaur. Half man, half bull, the Minotaur's strength is so great he can wield two-handed weapons with a single hand. New PvE quests, new encounters, and new areas for RvR combat will join the quad-wielder to give even longer (and hairier) legs to the franchise....

Flying Lab Software announced the addition of avatar combat to Pirates of the Burning Sea, an MMO that's set in the Caribbean during the 1720s. Initially not slated for launch, avatar combat was added to amplify the need for strategy and skill during off-ship encounters as well as onboard enemy ships....



Simutronics announced its first licensee for HeroEngine, its completely integrated development platform for MMOs. Not widely known for making rash, poor decisions, Bioware Austin chose the engine for its upcoming game....

Another high-profile license acquisition was Sony Online's agreement with Epic Games to use its UnrealEngine 3 technology for a number of future projects, including the DC Comics-based game currently under development at SOE-Austin....

out of the box

by Brett Todd

Mod Money

Charging for mods that once were free doesn't make you suck

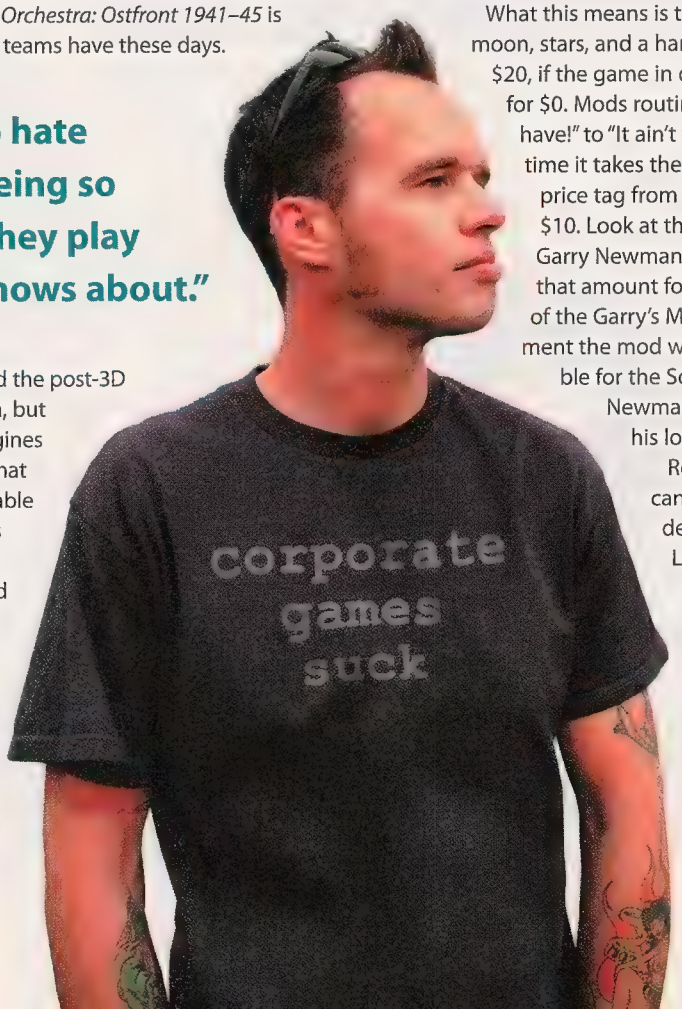
Does success make you suck? Fans of indie rock have long held that you lose all credibility and talent the instant you sign with a major label. From that point on, you're a traitor to the hardcore who were with you when you were nobody, a stiff for the suits. But since money talks even louder than disgruntled fanboys on message boards, it's tough not to sell out.

And I can't argue with that approach. I'm into my mid-30s now, and a long, long way beyond valuing empty rebellions over sticking money in the bank. I haven't gotten upset over a rock band hitting the big time since REM left IRS for Warner.

So I can't share the angst currently going around the mod community about modders selling out and signing up with major players like Steam. To me, going commercial the way Outerlight Ltd. did to sell *The Ship* and Tripwire Interactive did to push copies of *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 1941–45* is the only option that mod teams have these days.

"Some gamers seem to hate losing the cachet of being so hardcore geeky that they play games nobody else knows about."

Now that we've entered the post-3D era (think postmodernism, but with polygons), game engines have grown so complex that they aren't readily modifiable by a team of average Joes pulling late nighters and weekends at the keyboard anymore. Ambitious mods require a lot of effort in the post-Source era, and that's usually too much to ask of an ad hoc crew slaving away with no possibility of making a buck or two in the end.



Also, it's not like we're losing anything in the transition from free to retail. I've yet to see a mod game get worse with a move from freebie download to retail purchase. *The Ship* was a cute trifle in its original form as a free *Half-Life* mod, but it's really come alive in its second life as a $20 Steam download. Devs now have the time and money to fine-tune the gameplay, which helps introduce it to a wider audience, get more people playing, and in turn make the whole murder-mystery theme more interesting. The same goes for *Red Orchestra*, which has been transformed from cult hit to veritable online phenomenon since hitting Steam last spring and is now inspiring many mods of its own.

Still, there's been a backlash. Some gamers equate cheap or free with good and anything that costs a few bucks with bad. But this doesn't make sense. Too many gamers seem to have personal grudges against fave mods that go commercial, probably because they hate losing the cachet of being so hardcore geeky that they play games nobody else knows about.

This general prejudice also seems to be wafting into the gaming world at large and placing a stigma on mods that have made the transition from free download to retail purchase, whether online or off. In many eyes, giving a product away means that it isn't worth any money, and by doing so you surrender the right ever to charge for it. Worse, you establish a sense of entitlement, so that even the biggest fans of your work feel they have a right to it, gratis, till the end of time.

What this means is that people want the earth, moon, stars, and a ham on rye for a lousy $10 or $20, if the game in question was once offered for $0. Mods routinely go from "It's a must-have!" to "It ain't worth paying for!" in the time it takes the developer to change the price tag from "Free! Please Take One!" to $10. Look at the reception that greeted Garry Newman when he decided to charge that amount for the forthcoming version 10 of the Garry's Mod physics tool. One moment the mod was the coolest toy imaginable for the Source engine; the next, Newman was accused of betraying his loyal fanbase.

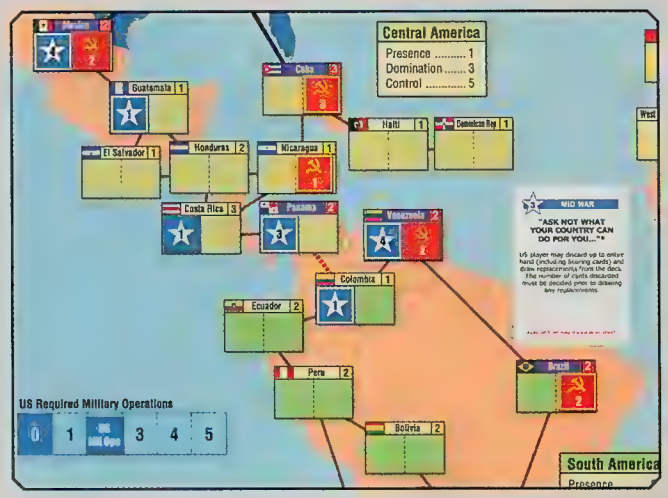
Regardless of geek angst, we can expect to see more modders selling out in the future. Let's face it, these days, there has to be at least a pot of pennies sitting at the end of the rainbow to encourage modders to put in the time required to make a landmark mod. And I'd rather pony up a few bucks for a great game or mod than play a second-rate one for free. ■

Twilight Struggle

Designers Ananda Gupta and Jason Matthews **Publisher** GMT Games **MSRP** $50 **Playing time** 3 hours **Players** 2 ★★★★½

Games about the Cold War tend to be disguised ones about nuclear war. The best board game of 2006 so far is a throwback to Chris Crawford's computer classic *Balance of Power*. In fact, the designers explicitly refer to Crawford's game in their design notes. As in Crawford's game, the player who initiates a nuclear exchange loses.

Twilight Struggle is a "Euro game" masquerading as a wargame. You won't get to move nuclear subs around or build up conventional forces. The game board depicts countries as interconnected areas with various levels of superpower influence. The game internalizes the "falling dominoes" theory of international relations, and the result is a tense game of area control, where you're constantly watching your opponents.



What makes the game are the event cards—a standard feature of the best GMT wargames—that develop the theme better than perhaps any card-driven GMT game to date. Unlike in previous designs, here playing an opponent's event card triggers that event. This means card management is the game's biggest consideration, and playing the game well requires a good knowledge of the contents of the deck.

When it was first released, *Twilight Struggle* got the reputation of being unbalanced in favor of the USSR. While this isn't the case, the randomness of the card draw greatly affects the outcome. This is fine for players who like to "manage chaos," but it may put off people accustomed to the traditional Euro design, where luck rarely plays a decisive role. If you're willing to accept the intrusion of the Fates, it's a game you don't want to miss. **–Brett Todd**

SPOTLIGHT: KILLING FLOOR 2.0

Sorry, Howlin' Wolf, but this Killing Floor makes you want to stick around, not "quit you and run off to Mexico." Version 2.0 of the zombie mash-up (**killingfloor.freedomsnet.net**) impressively builds on the survival-horror vibe of last year's initial release with even more bloody-minded intensity.

The "blow away zombies with friends" premise based on the Invasion mode from *Unreal Tournament 2004* remains crazy addictive. Sure, making a last stand against the shambling undead hordes swarming the streets of old London town sounds simplistic—and it pretty much is—but lead developer Mr. Kadish has added a great wrinkle to Invasion by allowing you to shut off enemy access points by welding shut doorways.

Two-fisted shooting is the only way to stay alive amid the zombies of Killing Floor 2.0.

Having this option gives every match loads of intense triage moments where you have to choose between trying to rescue wounded or surrounded comrades and cutting your losses by abandoning them to the hungry dead. Since you have seconds to decide whether to play hero or belt out an a cappella rendition of "I Will Survive," matches quickly turn from cooperative buddyfests to cutthroat competitions where you do anything to stay one step ahead of the rotting mob.

In many ways, version 2.0 is like a director's cut of the original. It's basically the same game with everything cleaned up and the solo mode dropped (boo!) so that the devs could concentrate on refining multiplayer and making the game look better (yay!).

Basically, Killing Floor 2.0 is the next best thing to *Dead Rising* for the Xbox 360. There are still a few bugs to be stamped on, but this is an absolute must for multiplayer shooter fans who can never get too much Romero. **–Brett Todd**

MODSQUADS

by Brett Todd

Quake 4 Goes 2D

Goofy spelling aside, Quake 4: HardQore looks like one of the more interesting experimental mods to hit the web in some time. Development lead Revility and his 10-man mod team are currently hard at work turning the first-person combat of *Quake 4* into a 2D scroller that plays like a modernized, bloodied-up version of *Contra* with Strogg. A retro feel is being emphasized in every step of the development process, so that the final game plays like a hepped-up console game from the early '90s. All of the traditional *Quake* hardware will be featured, including fan-fave melee weapons like the chainsaw, and support will be provided for both solo and cooperative play in the 10-level campaign. A demo is expected to be available by the time you read this, so get to the official website and start blasting Strogg already.

hardqore.planetquake.gamespy.com

[clockwise from top] Quake 4: HardQore, Darkness Over Daggerford, C1 The Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan

F.R.E.E. F.E.A.R.

Even though the full retail version of *F.E.A.R.* isn't as good, or as frightening, as the hype-meisters at Sierra would have you believe, you can't argue with a free game. And that's exactly what *F.E.A.R. Combat* is. All of the multiplayer modes have been turned into a standalone, 1.85GB multiplayer game. Needless to say, this is a must-have for any multiplayer shooter fan. It's also the best way to experience *F.E.A.R.*, because the multiplayer modes strip away all of the lame "spooky little girl with bad bangs" moments and leave you with nothing but what the game does best: gung-ho tactical combat that turns walls into Swiss cheese.

joinfear.com

It's Damn Dark in Daggerford

Thank the demise of BioWare's Premium Modules franchise for your ability to play Darkness Over Daggerford for free. This *Neverwinter Nights* module from Ossian Studios was supposed to be pay-to-play, but it's now being offered for nothing. That's a bit of a shame, because somebody should be making money off this 20-30–hour epic set in and around the town of Daggerford, a sleepy burg on the Sword Coast in the classic *D&D* Forgotten Realms setting. Many *Neverwinter Nights* conventions have been turned on their Elven ears here, courtesy of an expansive new world map that gives the module a spacious feel and extensive dialogue that makes the game play like a lost chapter in the *Baldur's Gate* series. Even the look of the module is dramatically different from the usual homebrewed adventures, owing to the use of two exclusive tilesets (including one gorgeous new wilderness setting that greatly enhances the look of the often-jagged four-year-old game) licensed from BioWare. The download weighs in at a sturdy 215MB, but it's worth every byte.

nwvault.ign.com/View.php?view=modules.Detail&id=5122

Not a Gygaxian Landmark, but Close Enough

And just to continue the *NWN* lovefest, be sure to check out C1 The Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan, a conversion of the classic pen-and-paper *D&D* module from 1979. While the original module in question doesn't quite have the geek cred of a Gygaxian landmark like, say, *S1 Tomb of Horrors* or *S3 Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*, anyone who's a sucker for old-school Greyhawk gaming will love this one. Designer ENoa4 has nicely captured the feel of hack-'n'-slash *AD&D* from way back in the day. Just keep in mind that the module is over two years old now and seems a bit dated when compared with more recent brethren that take advantage of the evolution in module design since 2004.

nwvault.ign.com/View.php?view=modules.Detail&id=3848

Alt.Games

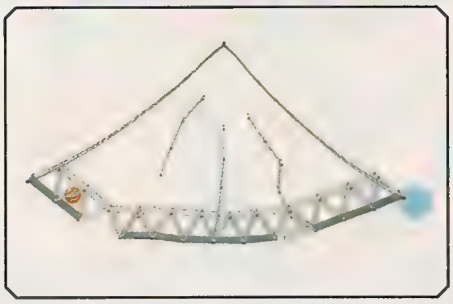
By Troy S. Goodfellow

Armadillo Run Peter Stock

You can't change the laws of physics, but you can use them to push a yellow volleyball into a blue circle. This *Incredible Machines*–like game gives you limited materials and a budget to meet your goal. With no single way to solve a given puzzle, *Armadillo Run* stretches your brain without straining the pocketbook. The puzzles range from straightforward drops to the manipulation of counterweights and rubber bands. The game has taken the indie world by storm, and it's easy to see why. It has a clean look and an elegant interface, and the only surprises are when your convoluted machines of cloth and rope do the job right. This addictive game cottons to both your sense of logic and your sense of destruction. **armadillorun.com**

DevastationZone Troopers CGS Software

This month's ode to alien zapping comes by way of *DevastationZone Troopers*, a third-person shooter that has lots of power-ups and lots of things to kill. Each alien death you cause adds to your bank account, which you can then spend on new weapons to kill more aliens to increase your bank account. The environment isn't fully destructible, but you can blast away cliffs to open new sniping zones. While controls are fully customizable, the default setup works nicely. The music can get a little grating, but the lingering wreckage of dead robots is a nice touch to help you find your way. **cgssoftware.com**



[top to bottom] DevastationZone Troopers, Flower Quest, Armadillo Run

Flower Quest Bee/Alawar Games

Casual gamers may want to take a look at this connect-the-path puzzler that casts you as an Elf girl trying to beat a flowered path through your lifetime. The setup doesn't matter, since the game is about connecting dead roots to life-giving flowers and clearing squares whenever two flowers are linked. Timed maps can get pretty hairy at times, especially when evil flowers show up to undo all the work you've done. The Elf theme is nicely drawn in a fairy-tale way, and the bonus rounds are easy ways to rack up points. **alawar.com/games/flower-quest**

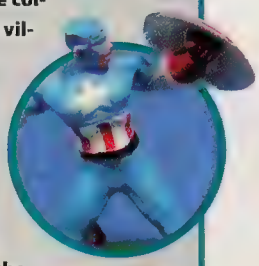
MODBLURBS

Garry Newman has been posting more online info about the development of the hotly anticipated next version of Garry's Mod. It's almost ready to go on Steam, where it will sell for around $10....

Richard Borg strikes again! The designer of Memoir '44 has another hit on his hands with Commands & Colors: Ancients. This depiction of ancient warfare from the dawn of recorded history to the end of late antiquity is both sprawling and compact, as most scenarios play out in no more than a couple of hours....

Thanks to the Mare Nostrum mod (marenostrumgame.com), you'll soon be able to take Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41–45 to the Mediterranean. It will cover WWII from Cairo to Rome and will be released in two parts. The action will get under way next spring with the North African–themed Afrikafeldzug 40–43 and conclude later in 2007 with Campagna Italiana 43–45.....

Based on the post-GenCon buzz, Fantasy Flight Games' Marvel Heroes looks to be the hottest commodity in the board gaming world this Christmas season. Both the game and the colorful hero figures and villains used as playing pieces certainly seemed to go over big with the crowds in Indianapolis. It's expected to be smashing its way into retail stores at about the same time as this magazine....



Pimp Your Civ 4

Surrender your life to Sid Meier again, one turn at a time, with these mods for Civilization IV

BY BRETT TODD

Given that *Civilization IV* is already one of the most compulsive pastimes invented since the slot machine, the Firaxis game doesn't need any help from modders. So it's with a bit of trepidation—hey, nobody wants to be an enabler—that we introduce you to some of the finest total conversions, graphical upgrades, and scenarios available for this addictive masterpiece.

If the recently released *Warlords* expansion pack hasn't already reminded you that *Civ IV* is the sort of mesmerizing game that breaks up happy homes, the following mods will clue you in pretty damn quickly. So don't blame us if they ruin your marriage, your senior year, or that pumpkin you've been growing all year for the county fair.

AGE OF DISCOVERY 1492–1792 By Dale

Anyone with fond memories of *Seven Cities of Gold* will enjoy Age of Discovery 1492–1792. This scenario recreates the discovery of the New World, which basically means that you compete with other European powers of the time (England, Portugal, Holland, Spain, etc.) to explore and conquer eastern North America and the Caribbean as quickly as possible. **Forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=144659**

ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN MOD By Jan van der Crabben

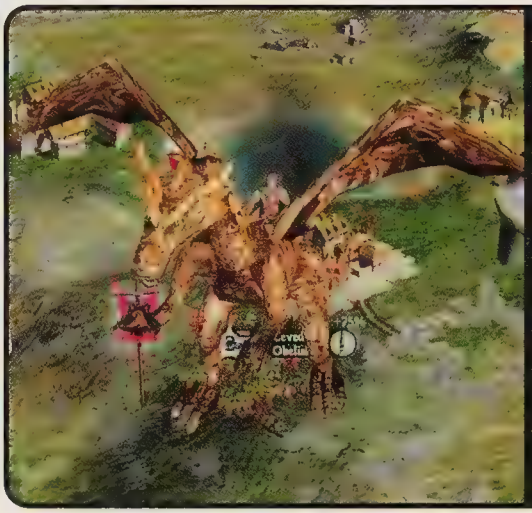
Classical history buffs will have their hands full with this mod. Version 1.94 of Jan van der Crabben's take on the ancient civilizations around Rome's *Mare Nostrum* includes about two dozen civilizations, along with a few new Wonders and changes to the tech tree. It features major players like Rome and Egypt, along with little guys such as Lydia and Illyria, so consider this a well-rounded look at B.C. life. **jan.vandercrabben.name/tam**

BLUE MARBLE TERRAIN By ColdFever

NASA's probably spent billions of your tax dollars photographing every square inch of the Earth with its Blue Marble Project, so get your money's worth out of it and download the Blue Marble Terrain mod. ColdFever has taken NASA's pricey pics and upgraded *Civ IV*'s standard maps with their photo-realistic counterparts and higher-resolution textures. The only drawback is that the maps are so detailed that they can make the game a bit sluggish. **civfanatics.net/~bluemarble/content/index.php**

CANADA MOD By Wyz_sub10

Hosers will love the Canada Mod, as it adds the Canadian Empire (stop laughing) to the list of playable civs, along with fully animated leaders Pierre Trudeau and Sir John A. MacDonald. The lineup of back-bacon-loving Great People has been bolstered with the addition of luminaries like Emily Carr,



FALL FROM HEAVEN II By Kael

Dip a toe into some *Lord of the Rings*-style fantasy with this outstanding total conversion. It replaces the historical settings of the original game with a fantasy backdrop that includes dragons, heroes, spells, and units that are promoted like RPG characters. **civilization4.filefront.com/file/Fall_from_Heaven_2;64936**

Sir Sandford Fleming, and Frank Gehry. Infantry units bear the names of famous Canadian regiments like the Princess Pats, Royal Winnipeg Rifles, and Van Doos. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=138477**

EUROPA EUROPA 3: THE EUROPEAN EMPIRES MOD By ArbitraryGuy

Consider this the bastard love child of *Civ IV* and *Europa Universalis*. It's set in medieval/Renaissance Europe, with 18 civs competing to build empires based on trade networks to the New World. Religion plays a big part in the mod, which has been made more realistic and true to the era with the addition of squabbling Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Reform Christian factions. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=144971**

ETHNICALLY DIVERSE UNITS By White Rabbit

The melting pot philosophy of *Civ IV* has been reworked in Ethnically Diverse Units. This mod changes a number of units so that they appear more like real representatives of their respective civilizations. For example, Egyptian settlers now wear robes and lead camels, while Arab spearmen look like they could have suited up alongside Saladin. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=167435**

RHYE'S FLAG DECAL PACK By Rhye

Jazz up banners with Rhye's Flag Decal Pack, a collection of imaginative flags for some of the most popular civs. Rhye has done a great job of livening up the flags without simply copying modern variants. He also has stayed fairly true to history with such interesting flag logos as the Athenian owl representing Greece, 13 white stars on a blue background for the U.S.A., and a palm tree and Saudi coat of arms for Arabia. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=138753**

SEVOMOD 3 By Sevo

If any of these mods is a must-have, it's this one. It totally overhauls the original game and includes more content than the average retail expansion pack. On tap in version 3.0 are 23 new civilizations and 37

REGIMENTS By Porges

Do you find the characters displayed in the average *Civ IV* unit too abstract to convey the sense of fighting a real war? Then download this mod, which fills out every formation. Axemen now attack in a veritable horde, siege weapons are manned by a crew of operators, scouts get a dog, and settlers are fleshed out with the addition of a child. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=159352**

new leaders with fully animated bobbleheads, including a few highly original choices, such as Canada's Sir MacDonald and Trudeau, Scotland's Robert the Bruce, and Turkey's Ataturk. It also boasts 11 new Wonders, new civ traits, a pile of new units, and brilliant rule tweaks that include the ability to enslave enemies and gain percentages of enemy tech by capturing their cities. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=167461**

SEVOPEDIA By Sevo

If you're nonplussed by the clunky Civlopedia, install Sevo's Sevopedia. It revamps Sid Meier's *Encyclopedia Britannica* rip-off with a user-friendly interface that moves menus around, allows you to open entries on the main viewing page (no more flipping back and forth!), and unlocks some hidden descriptions. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=148253**

THE SONG OF THE MOON By JBG

Shift your civilization-building exploits to Luna with The Song of the Moon. This total conversion moves the action to the moon, where you build lunar colonies with 15 all-new civs, like the space agencies and multinational corporations. It remains a work in progress, with some noteworthy balance problems and bugs, but the unique 3D art and setting still make it worth a look. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=160498**

STAR WARS MOD By Civmansam and Team

Civmansam and pals get docked a couple of points for the lame title, but this still does a pretty good job of bringing the galaxy far, far away to *Civ IV*. Sixteen civs representing George Lucas' best and brightest are on hand, including biggies like the Old Republic and the Galactic Empire and small fry like the Wookiees and the Quarren. New units include a lot of traditional *Star Wars* hardware like astromech droids, and of course all the standard religions have been replaced with light and dark variants of the Force. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=157016**

WWI, WWII, COLD WAR MODS By MaxRiga

If the 20th century is your thing, try MaxRiga's three scenarios depicting the world in 1901, 1941, and 1961. Each reflects the geopolitical situation of the era in question. So 1901 is a bit of a free-for-all, with up-and-coming Germany taking on mighty Great Britain; 1941 deals with a world in flames; and 1961 presents most of the nations divided between the American and Soviet spheres of influence. Many new units bring the eras to life, too. In 1901, for example, the Germans can crank out the Fokker Dr. I triplane (curse you, Red Baron!), while in 1961 the Americans can deploy Los Angeles-class nuclear submarines. **maxriga.civfanatics.ru**

TAN INTERFACE By Gogf

Blues giving you the blues? Install Gogf's Tan Interface, and you can replace the default azure color of the interface with a more soothing light brown. You can also display colors other than the default tan by changing the numerical RGB value while installing the mod. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=138104**

TOTAL REALISM 2.0 By Total Realism Team

One of the greatest mods ever? That's what the Total Realism Team calls its comprehensive re-imagining of *Civ IV*. It reworks all of the default civs and their units. Most notably, it adds rule tweaks like turn-by-turn razing of cities, the ability to put generals in charge of armies (without using the *Warlords* expansion), the option of capturing and enslaving enemies, and a new religious system where the first civ to found a religion becomes the protector of that faith. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=173492**

WORLD WAR I

By Jon "Trip" Shafer

The Great War looks pretty, um, great in World War I, a scenario whipped up by Firaxis developer Shafer in his spare time. It begins with the start of hostilities in August of 1914 and continues for 72 turns, or until one nation wipes out everybody else. Version 2 features some refinements and rule tweaks, most notably a reduction in the cost of units that allows civs to quickly ramp-up war production. **forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=170090**

BOARD GAMES... OF THE DEAD!!!

Celebrate All Hallows Eve in cardboard form with these horrific adventures

BY BRETT TODD

Halloween may be fast approaching, but that doesn't mean you have to sit around the house twiddling your thumbs waiting for the Great Pumpkin. Instead, gear up for the spookiest night of the year with some of your eeriest friends and a few of these horrific board games.

Arkham Horror ★★★★½

Designers Richard Launius, Kevin Wilson **Publisher** Fantasy Flight Games
Players 1-8 **Playing** Time 3-5 Hours **MSRP** $49.95

Looking for Lovecraft this Halloween? You'll find the Cthulhu Mythos master in Fantasy Flight Games' re-imagining of a 1984 classic that may just be the best adventure-style boardgame this side of Yith. A great role-playing vibe and gameplay balanced between luck and strategy make it perfect for pen-and-paper RPG fans too busy to crack out the 20-sided die.

Expect to feel overwhelmed on your first few attempts at closing dimensional gates and hitting the snooze button so a Great Old One like Cthulhu or Hastur doesn't wake up cranky and destroy the world. Turns are long and winding, and you have to keep an eye on character sheets, tokens of every shape and size, over a dozen decks of cards, enough monster chits to fill a small sack, and a convoluted game board as big as the average dining-room table.

You also have to think strategically all the time. Moving requires forethought, because you have to anticipate monster movement and deal with other factors, such as airborne beasties swooping down from the sky when you end a turn on a street square.

-3
Worshippers
Ithaqua's worshippers eat the flesh of their fellow men, gaining supernatural power through their dark practice. Cultists have their toughness increased by 2.
Ithaqua
Icy Winds
While Ithaqua stirs in his slumber, any investigator in a street area at the end of the Mythos Phase loses 1 Stamina. In addition, all Weather cards are discarded without their special effects taking place.
None
Start of Battle
Investigators must roll a die for every item they have, discarding the item on a failure
Attack
Each investigator must pass a Fight (+1) check or lose 2 Stamina. This check's modifier decreases by 1 each turn (+0 the 2nd turn, -1 the 3rd turn, etc.)
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11

Combat is even more elaborate. Battles are resolved by rolling bones, but variables such as your adjustable statistics, environmental effects, and a wide range of monster stats and resistances have to be accounted for every time you contemplate picking up the dice.

All that, and *Arkham Horror* also plays great solo. It isn't quite perfect, though. Games can drag past the four-hour mark, and the Cthulhu theme is watered down with non-Mythos monsters like witches and maniacs. Overwrought quotes from Lovecraft's tales are missing, and there's too much gung-ho combat.

Still, if you're down with shotgunning the occasional Shoggoth, there is no better game with which to ring in Halloween 2006.

Fury of Dracula ★★★½

Designers Stephen Hand, Kevin Wilson
Publisher Fantasy Flight Games **Players** 2-5
Playing Time 2 Hours **MSRP** $49.95

Another FFG remake of an oldie-but-goodie, this refashions the Games Workshop game from 1987 into less of a mystery about hunting the Count in Victorian Europe, and more of a combat-heavy chase. This change was presumably made to rev up the moderate pace of the original game, but it also has the unfortunate side effect of removing some of the detective-story tension.

Gameplay still centers on one to four hunters roaming Europe in search of another player controlling Count Blah, but now the bloodsucker leaves a trail of cards, so he's easier to follow. This feature eliminates the "Where the hell is he?" guesswork of the original game, which was too much like Vampire Battleship for some tastes. But it also generates a lot of simplistic, die-rolling combat that fundamentally alters the character of play.

Still, if you can forget about the nervous anticipation that began to build on those rare occasions you picked up Drac's tail in the original, this new *Fury of Dracula* remains an interesting diversion, especially at this time of year. The theme is well-developed and evocative of Bram Stoker's novel, and gameplay is so light that you can play while handing out candy to trick-or-treaters.

Mall of Horror ★★★½

Designer Nicolas Normandon
Publisher Asmodée Editions **Players** 3-6
Playing Time 1-2 Hours **MSRP** $44.99

Live out George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* in *Mall of Horror*. This Asmodée Editions zombie-fest is a blast for five or six people, thanks to cutthroat rules that force you to make and break alliances to stay one step ahead of the stinky dead.

Mechanics are simple and brutal. You survive by treachery, mainly by voting for characters to die whenever zombie numbers escalate and somebody's got to be shoved out of a store. If you've got a lot of so-so friends in your gaming group up for a stab-in-the-back evening with a macabre theme, you can't go wrong.

OTHER PICKS FROM THE MAUSOLEUM

Betrayal at House on the Hill

This update of the 1985 cult hit *Chill: Black Morn Manor* features a haunted house, a turncoat player, scenarios based on horror flicks, and a lot of rule problems. (Avalon Hill)

Dracula

One of the few horror-themed Euro games, *Dracula* is a *Concentration*-style card game centering on memorization and bluffing. (Rio Grande Games)

Fearsome Floors

As in most Euro games, the theme in this puzzle/racing-oriented look at escaping a monster is almost meaningless. (Rio Grande Games)

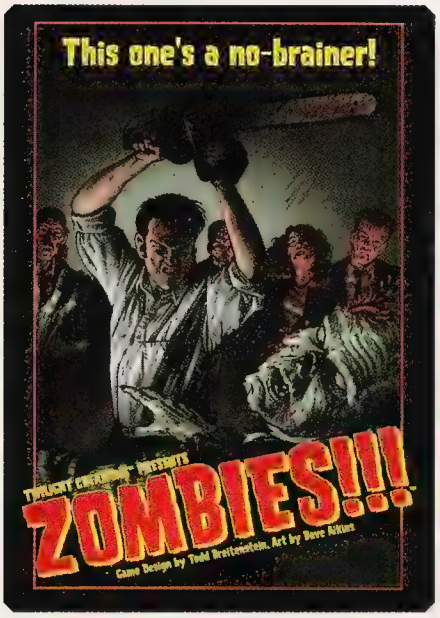
MidEvil

For *Zombies!!!* fans only. This is a straight rip, with an *Army of Darkness* setting and skeletons replacing zombies. (Twilight Creations)

When Darkness Comes

Cheap components hurt this quasi-RPG from the creators of *Zombies!!!*, but the quantity of scenarios offered by the original game and its six expansions offsets the quality problems. Somewhat. (Twilight Creations)

Just make sure you have a lot of players. Games of *Mall of Horror* with the minimum three players, or even four, tend to be snoozy, as there just aren't enough people in those matches to pull off entertaining betrayals.



Zombies!!! ★★

Designers Todd Breitenstein, Dave Aikins
Publisher Twilight Creations **Players** 2-6
Playing Time 2-4 Hours **MSRP** $27.99

Zombies!!! is scarier for length and luck-dependence than it is for decomposing bad guys. This is a tile-laying dicefest where you shoot zombies and collect tokens, yet it can take four hours before somebody reaches the helipad to get out of Dodge, as adventure cards are repetitive and feature way too many "screw your neighbor" options.

That said, the theme and the pile of plastic zombies make *Zombies!!!* worth a go if you're a Romero fan. Expansions also improve the gameplay. The *3.5 Not Dead Yet!* card pack balances the original deck, while the four others allow for shorter matches. ■

World of Boardgames

Want to play some boardgames online, for free? Try Brettspielwelt. It's easier to "get your boardgame on" with this site than it is to pronounce it.

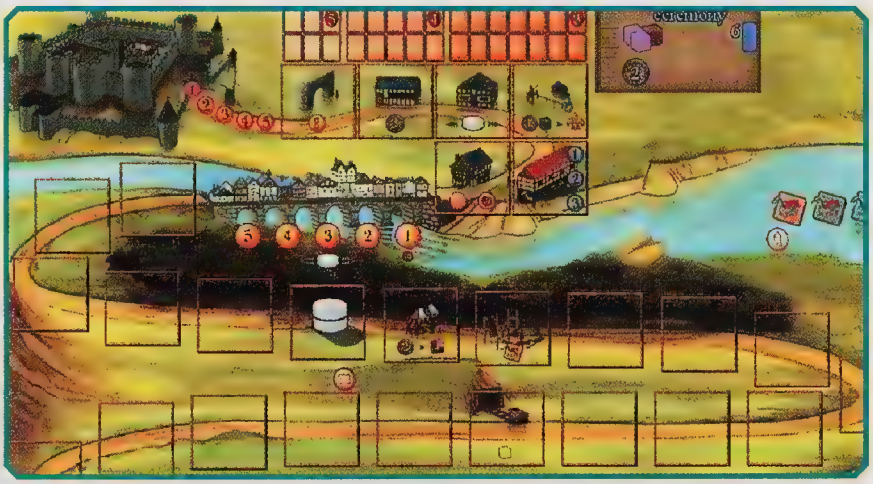
BY BRUCE GERYK

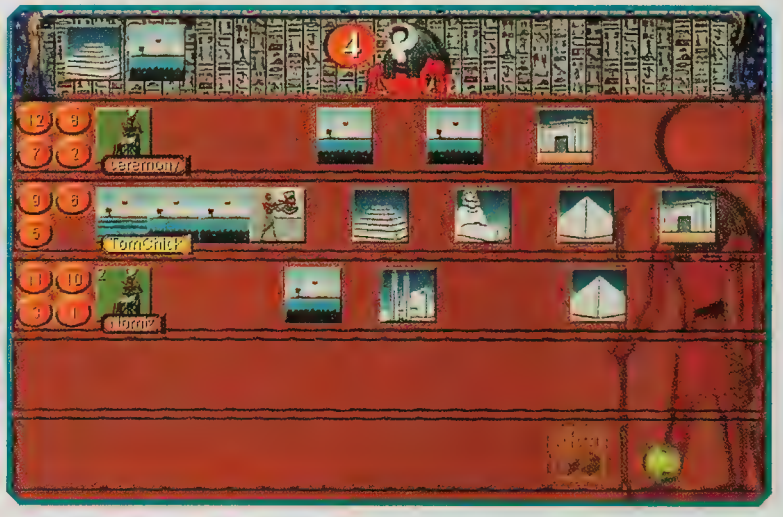
The Internet revolution that made it possible for anonymous 15-year-olds named PsYcHo666 to kill me repeatedly in *Battlefield 2* has also made it possible for previously isolated boardgamers to play some pretty cool games with one another without having to leave home. Because Germans are good at everything except invading Russia, they've created a nifty site called Brettspielwelt (brettspielwelt.de), which translates to "boardgame world." It's a place where you can play these games against anonymous Europeans named UberSpieler666. They're a lot more polite, though.

Boardgames are all about personal interaction, which is why a site for getting your boardgame on anonymously seems kind of pointless. But if your friends are all over the country and can basically get together in person once a year for a weekend, then keeping in touch by playing some excellent boardgames isn't a bad idea. And those crazy Germans can end up being pretty helpful. When they're not beating you silly.

Some of the best "Euro games" are available at Brettspielwelt, including *Puerto Rico*, *Caylus*, *Power Grid*, *Ra*, and this year's Spiel des Jahres (Game of the Year) winner, *Thurn und Taxis*. The interfaces aren't always the best, and they can be quite unforgiving ("As played!"), but they serve two vital purposes, the most important of which is convenience: You can live in Chicago and play a game with your old college buddy in New York.

The second purpose is actually to speed the game along. *Caylus* can get pretty long and fiddly in person with four players, and you're always in danger of forgetting to give





Some of the best "Euro games" are available at Brettspielwelt, including Puerto Rico, Caylus, Power Grid, Ra, and this year's Spiel des Jahres (Game of the Year) winner, Thurn und Taxis.

someone his prestige point when someone else uses his building, or of doing it twice, or of not paying the right amount of money, or whatever. The Brettspielwelt interface does all of this, unerringly. In repeated controlled tests, a game of *Caylus* that takes almost two hours in person takes less than 50 minutes on Brettspielwelt. A 45-minute game of *Thurn und Taxis* takes 15. If you lose, there is the inevitable rematch.

In fact, I'd love to have some kind of cyborg Brettspielwelt on hand to adjudicate games when I'm playing in person. I get so used to the perfect rules adherence in Brettspielwelt games that I get annoyed when I'm playing *Puerto Rico* and I want to know who the governor will be next turn. Hey! Leave that governor tile out where I can see it.

The interfaces are a bit hardcore, with hardly an "undo" function to be found. This can cause much wailing and gnashing of teeth when you don't hit the right button to use the *postillion* or *amtmann*, or you just moved the bailiff in *Caylus* because you accidentally clicked the mouse when it happened to be positioned over the wrong spot. In a way, though, this rigidity has its advantages, because it makes people play more carefully. When they make a move, they make a move. You'll never have to deal with the super-irritating "Wait, I didn't want to do that… let me take part of this move back" problem.

Sometimes that problem is caused by things like the words *postillion* and *amtmann*. Even the "English" client seems to have a very lax definition of what is part of that language. It's nice if you're familiar with the game in the first place, so the first time you can puzzle out what the buttons do. Or have a friend explain it to you by walking you through it.

With the help of Skype or an instant messenger with voice like Yahoo, that's actually pretty easy. Explaining a game over Brettspielwelt isn't much more difficult than explaining it face to face, and you can do almost all the trash-talking you'd do in person. Of course, it's not the same as sitting next to your buddy and drinking a beer, but how many people have more than a couple hours a week to do that? Could you fit a transcontinental flight and two games of *Ra* into a Thursday evening? ■

In Praise of Tiles

My problem with BSW, as I call it since I can't remember "Brettspielwelt" for the life of me, isn't just that it's German. Although that does figure in. When Bruce introduced me to it, I somehow got stuck with the German language client. During my first few games, I assumed it didn't come in English, so I was confronted with various umlaut-laden words like Bauhütte and Gebäudeaktivierung. This made me inadvertently do things like choose the Captain during the first round of a game of *Puerto Rico*. If you don't know boardgames, you'll just have to trust me that this is one of the dumbest things you can do, right up there with ending your turn before your indigo plantations have produced. I did that, too.

Eventually, I reinstalled and everything came out in English. But the problem I have that can't be solved by a reinstall is more philosophical. Some people find it's helpful having the computer track details like how much food you have and when you can calculate your routes and whether you're allowed to take two royal favors on the same track or not. But I like the way my brain has to kick into gear when I'm playing a boardgame. It's like a combination of math drills, strategizing, and cognitive juggling. I actually don't want the computer offloading the mental challenge.

Also, boardgames don't really work for me when they go virtual. I like their tactile-ness, the flat smack of a laid tile, the snap of a drawn card, the rattle of a rolled die. I flip things and turn them and scoot them and sit them on top of other things. Without this aspect, they aren't boardgames anymore. I might as well go play *Civilization* or *Disgaea*.

And above all, I appreciate the physical presence of my friends. My buddy Rich is on my right, Steiner is on my left, and Gordo is across the table. I understand how valuable BSW is to Bruce when he doesn't enjoy the luxury of nearby friends with time to spare. But because of Rich, Steiner, Gordo, and my other friends, BSW is not for me. And for that, I'm thankful. –Tom Chick

Bored?

No one needs to know what
you're really doing at work

Download hundreds of games right to your computer!

cgonline.boonty.com

Action ■ Adventure ■ Classics ■ Puzzle & Words ■ Simulation ■ Sports ■ Racing ■ and More!

applied game theory BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

I Love Rock 'n' Roll

Shredding and wailing with Guitar Hero

Ripping a power chord on a Gibson Les Paul through a Marshall stack is a transcendent experience. Or at least the folks at Harmonix and Red Octane, makers of *Guitar Hero*, seem to think so. But *Guitar Hero* is much more than a rockin' good game: It's an important example of how games function as art. Games offer us new experiences that can open up new ways of being in the world, and *Guitar Hero* suggests design principles that others might harness to capture some of the magic of games.

Fans of Harmonix games will recognize *Guitar Hero* as the latest installment in its music games series, which includes *Frequency*, *Amplitude*, and *Karaoke Revolution*. The high concept here is that "every person should have the experience of making music" and that anyone who plays videogames has the basic skills (rhythm, timing, fine motor skills, ability to rapidly process visual information) to become a hip DJ or, now, a slaying guitar slinger. The trick is overcoming all of that bad music instruction that left us thinking we have no musical ability. You could even think of the games of Harmonix as a sort of public service.

The first trick is letting players achieve immediate successes. *Frequency* was exceptionally hard for newbies and non-musicians. Although most gamers can deal with failure in games, the moment music gets involved we freak out. Adhering to the adage that every gamer should experience new successes after five minutes, 15 minutes, and an hour seems to have paid off in terms of luring newcomers into making music.

But it's not enough just to "feel" successful; to get the experience of being a guitar hero, it helps if you actually get better at playing the guitar. Fans of music games will notice that Harmonix and Red Octane added a fourth and fifth button to the controller. This setup graduates difficulty as the game progresses (medium level introduces the fourth button, which demands use of the pinky, and the fifth button, which requires you to "shift" your hand into a second position).

Harmonix starts with the critical elements of playing the guitar: the simplest condition of strumming with the pick and picking out notes. It adds chords and introduces the pinky finger, which is tough for beginners, then tackles the notion of moving up and down the neck. Each stage is an authentic version of playing the guitar, with the same steps that real guitar players go through. Instructional designer Charles Reigeluth has called this approach the simplifying conditions method. People learn best when they begin with the most authentic yet simple conditions of a task, building layer on layer of complexity in order to build competence.

When you watch someone play *Guitar Hero*, you can't help but notice the performative aspect of its gameplay. Part of its pleasure is impressing your friends by nailing a tricky passage, or stylistically posing with the guitar as you unlock "star power." Cleverly, the game requires you to physically tilt the angle of the guitar, effectively posing like a rock star in order to unlock bonus points.

"The only thing I don't like about this game is that it has made me like Boston's 'More Than A Feeling.'"

You may be thinking: Fine, I'm getting better at clicking buttons at the right time and I'm posing like Nigel Tufnel, but what makes this the experience of making music? Non-musicians claim that the game teaches them to listen. By matching visual patterns to controller actions, and requiring you to press buttons to make sounds, it encourages you to isolate the guitar track from the rest of the song and tease out just what the "real" guitar player is doing. Even veteran musicians say that playing *Guitar Hero* helps them hear new parts. As one friend commented, "The only thing I don't like about this game is that it has made me like Boston's 'More Than A Feeling.'"

Many simple design features reinforce the musicality of the experience. One trademark Harmonix design feature is that the game only rewards correct playing of "phrases" of notes. In order to play through the song successfully, you have to learn passages, which include the critical space "between the notes." You're not playing "I Love Rock 'n' Roll" unless you can nail down the entire guitar riff, and the game scoring and balancing require you to do just that.

Does *Guitar Hero* turn you into a real guitar player? Probably not. But it helps people overcome their fear of making music and certainly makes picking up a real instrument that much easier. In the process, it shows us one reason games are such a compelling art form. They open new experiences to us that can become trajectories into new ways of being in the world. Playing "I Love Rock 'n' Roll" gives you a sweet feeling indeed, one that we can thank the folks at Harmonix and Red Octane for making more accessible.

Henry Jenkins and **Kurt Squire** are co-directors of The Education Arcade, which is based at MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the program can be found at educationarcade.org

random incoherence BY KELLY WAND

GG, GN, GL HF

A fond, ephemeral farewell to the greatest MMO ever

Dear *World of WarCraft*,

I know, I know. It's been a while. Don't look at me like that. I know you know that I've been playing other games, but I'm pretty sure we can safely agree you're the popular one. In fact, maybe that's what drove us apart. Popularity usually makes stuff suck. Still, however insincere it sounds, I really am happy for you, and for the hordes (get it?) of Undead Warlocks with their Deathmist armor sets who are cooler than me.

"I just need some space. The heart wants what the heart wants. I love you, but I'm not in love with you. We'll always have Paris. You can't fire me, I quit."

What's my problem now, you ask? Look, it's not you. It's me. I just need some space. The heart wants what the heart wants. I love you, but I'm not in love with you. I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed. We'll always have Paris. You can't fire me, I quit.

Wow. No pun intended. This isn't going well at all. Let me start over.

Both of us were a lot different when we first met. You were fun, and I was the only person I knew who'd gotten fired over you yet. We were simpatico. It was kismet. Granted, even during our salad days, it wasn't always savory, deviant, and delightful. But what is? You were down constantly for maintenance, and I'll admit I kinda sucked at you no matter what talent spec I settled on. Although you have to admit that being able to cast corruption a tenth of a second faster was a good idea baked.

And now look at you, more radiant than a soul pouch of shards and the 50 gold I blew on that extra bank slot combined. There's no disputing your power, elegance, or success. You've changed and matured in so many ways. True story: When I first heard that Noxious Scions would no longer be spawning upon cleansing Celebrian Vines, I actually smiled and thought, "Yup."

And now Steven "No Way" Spielberg wants to make a movie of your life. If anyone can humanize Liches, it's Steve. Look what he did for Tom Hanks. And my geese get pimples just pondering Dustin Hoffman's poignant death scene at the end of *Hook*, or at least we assume he's dead since the stuffed alligator that's just fallen on him belches right afterward, presumably in keeping with J.M. Barrie's dying hallucination. Personally, I see a young Julian Sands as Arthass, The Rock or Robert Mitchum as Thrall (my TV's so old, everyone on it looks green), Nick Nolte as Illidan, Jessica Simpson as Aegwynn, Jessica Alba as the Dark Ranger, Jessica Biel also as Aegwynn, and obviously Meeno Peluce (circa 1978) as Timmy. See? All the hard work's already done. Mr. Spielberg,

you're welcome.

Why, then, am I still leaving, even though The Rock's been inked? There's no simple answer to that.

I take that back. Instances suck, for one. They're tedious, repetitive, lengthy, buggy, and reward-wise, a total crapshoot-and-sandwich. They're lottery cards minus the instant gratification of smudging cardboard with gray shavings. What says relaxation more than a six-hour slog through endless labyrinths killing traffic lights with 39 of my closest friends? If not the alternative rut of PvP zerging [word?] six hours a day for life on the same three battlegrounds—although at least now that it's inter-realm, I can get pwned by guilds I've never heard of in ever faster cycles, periodic lag spikes notwithstanding.

But hey, *Burning Crusade*, the expansion that'll finally satisfy the heated desire of Horders worldwide to play as Elves, right? And the Alliance will have shamans of their own to bitch about and get their chance to play as agrarian versions of those zombie guys in Swamp of Sorrows. From what I understand, you went with Draenei because you're trying to showcase your "lore," or at least distance it a bit more respectably from *Warhammer*'s. Don't take this wrong, honey, but your lore's more cookie-cutter than a box of Oreos in a lawnmower, especially when ranked alongside stuff by George R.R. Martin, Brian McNaughton, Michael Moorcock, Karl Edward Wagner, Tanith Lee, Steven Erikson, Jack Vance, Mervyn Peake, Robert E. Howard, Gene Wolfe, Fritz Leiber, E. Nesbit, Roger Zelazny, China Mièville, Glen Cook, Clark Ashton Smith, Michael Shea, John Crowley, R. Scott Bakker, E.R. Eddison, Clifford Simak, Poul Anderson, Lord Dunsany, J.R.R. Tolkien, Stephen R. Donaldson, T.H. White, Dave Sim, Barry Hughart, Jeffrey Thomas, Terry Pratchett, John Myers, Lloyd Alexander, Ursula LeGuin, Michael Swanwick, R.A. MacAvoy, or L. Ron Hubbard. It ain't bad, just milquetoast. Needs more nutmeg.

Not to mention maybe a sense of menace and themes more mature than cereal-box illustrations. I know you like to play it squeakily safe these days, but before you came along, the word "warcraft" was synonymous with gore, amputation, fires, supply lines, pestilence, and the occasional assassination; not jewelry, gold farming, and 40-minute Baron runs. There hasn't been a war this half-hearted and -assed since Mason vs. Stack in *Caddyshack 2*. You're the best MMO ever, but the only way I could start taking your lore seriously was if guilds of your subscribers started attacking each other in real life using swords and fireballs and speed-hacks.

Come on, now, crying isn't making this any easier. OK, I'll admit it, I'm a little jealous. People have lost their jobs, mates, and lives over you and your succubus charms, while 18 installments of this column have so far failed to claim a single properly documented exploded head. Maybe it should switch to a red font.

And this isn't really goodbye; I'm sure I'll still check in from time to time. I've been seeing a lot of *Frozen Throne* lately. Little awkward, I suppose. But hey, in a way, it's a compliment: same genes and all that. Anyway, I have no doubt we can all be grownups about it.

What's she got that you don't? Um, well, since you ask, she doesn't keep me waiting hours on end; there's the visceral pleasure of exercising real skill and tactics, plus I don't catch flak for failing to check in constantly. In short, she reminds me of how you used to be.

All right, that did sound a little passive-aggressive; I apologize. No one's the villain here. I know that's how you like it.

Later,
Me

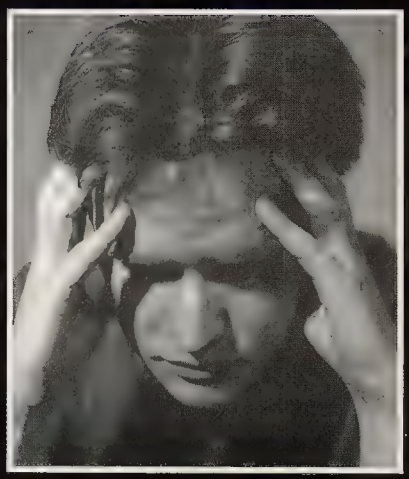
P.S. See you next week for the expansion!

Next month: The Mira Loma Middle School Meerkat Cheerleader Squad of Southwestern Michigan eats an old man's polyp! Fun-smelling for ages 8 and 88!

ADVERTISERS

2K Games 2kgames.com 4–5, 33
Aspyr aspyr.com 25
Chips & Bits chipsbits.com 66–69
Game Swap Zone gameswapzone.com ..... Inside Back
IGE ige.com ..... Back Cover
MASSIVE Magazine massive-magazine.com 43
Microsoft microsoft.com 11, 17
Namco namco.com 12–13, 35
Sega sega.com 6–7, 26–27
Sony Online Entertainment station.sony.com 14–15
Stardock stardock.com 8
THQ thq.com 2–3, 28–29
Ubisoft ubisoft.com 20–21
Vivendi Universal vugames.com 18–19

Yesterday, 1357 people purchased a bad game.



We can help.

Computer Games MAGAZINE

Subscribe and save 67% off the newstand cover price.

Get 12 issues for $19.97 or 12 issues with the Demo CD for $29.97.

Subscribe now:
cgonline.com/subscribe

three finger salute BY TOM CHICK

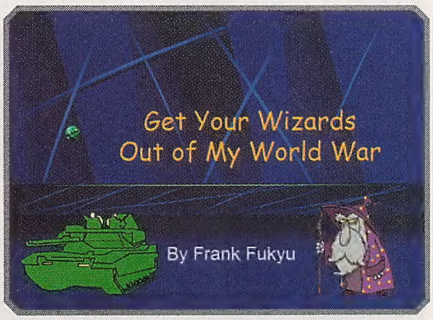
The End of History

Or "Keep your god powers out of my game"

Last issue, we looked at University of British Columbia graduate Robert Parungao's exposé on racism in gaming. After his eight-month-long study of four games, which comes to two months on each game, he came to the shocking conclusion that games are racist. The four games he looked at, at any rate.

This month, as the fourth part of our seven-part series on scholarly inquiry into game design, we sit down with Frank Fukyu, a graduate of Cal State Chatsworth known for his series of lectures on history in gaming. We caught up with him at the GameLANd Lounge in Reseda, where he had just finished speaking to a handful of people playing the original *Counter-strike*.

Fukyu's talk, "Get Your Wizards Out of My World War," is based on the forum post he wrote for GameDoctor.com's message board. It's a scathing indictment of what he considers the unnecessary introduction of supernatural elements into historical games.



"Fukyu's talk is a scathing indictment of what he considers the unnecessary introduction of supernatural elements into historical games."

"*Stronghold* and *Rise of Nations* both ditched the pure history that made them great. Now they have, like, dragons and stuff in *Stronghold Legends* and *Rise of Legends*. This crap is going to make children forget history. And you know what they say about those who forget history? Something about them not remembering it, I don't know the exact wording, but I know that it's not good for your grades. Ever since *Lord of the Rings* and *World of WarCraft* got so popular, everyone wants stuff like Orcs and god powers in their games. It's like people think pure history isn't fun."

"The latest one that really bugs me is *Company of Heroes*," Fukyu told me over Red Bulls and Frappuccinos. "Did they really have to go and sexy up the Nazis by giving them magical powers?" I asked him whether he thought it was done for gameplay reasons or was entirely superfluous. "I don't think it's superfluous," he said. "I just don't think you need it."

Fukyu holds up Ensemble as the one developer that learned to respect history enough not to add magic. "This was the company that taught millions of schoolchildren what a trebuchet was," he says. "But then here they come with *Age of Mythology*, teaching those same kids that Minotaurs were marching alongside Greek armies."

So Fukyu began a letter-writing campaign that involved sending an e-mail to Bruce Shelley. He likes to think his efforts were partly responsible for the way *Age of Empires III* turned out. "No spells in that game, except for priests that heal you up, but that's much more realistic than med kits, which they didn't have back then. I'm a little worried about the expansion. It looks like the Indians are getting rain dances and whatnot. If that happens, I still have Bruce Shelley's e-mail address."

Fukyu also praises *Age of Empires III* for its realistic portrayal of language. "When my Ottoman villager tells me that a town center is complete, I don't know what the hell he's saying, because I don't speak Ottoman. The only other game with that level of realism is *Battlefield 2*. In that game, if a soldier from the Middle Eastern Coalition tells me he's captured a flag, I'm all like, 'Whatever, dude, I can't understand you.' That's realistic, because if a soldier from the actual Middle Eastern Coalition were to talk to me, I wouldn't understand him. This teaches children that they need to pay attention in language classes, and not just so they know what 'piso mojado' means when they walk into a Subway. There's a whole other world out there, and in some places, no one will make sense."

Fukyu, whose main character in *World of WarCraft* is named PisoMojado, graduated with a degree from Cal State Chatsworth's new game design program. "It's not one of those things where they talk about tightening up the graphics on level three. We know that you have to do other things to level three, like ratchet up the audio, smarten up the AI, polish up the rough edges, and make the gun sounds more visceral."

Next month, we'll examine the findings of Gerard N. Platt, who has collected and analyzed dozens of forum posts to demonstrate that *Total Annihilation* is better than *StarCraft*, which actually sucks. ■

Computer Games Magazine (ISSN 1546–5101) is published monthly by Strategy Plus, Inc., 65 Millet Street, Suite 203, Richmond, VT, 05477. Subscription rate is $19.97 for a 12-issue subscription, $31.97 Canada. Periodical postage paid at Richmond, VT 05477 and additional mailing offices. **Produced in U.S.A.** **Postmaster:** Send address changes to Computer Games, PO Box 1965, Marion, OH 43306.

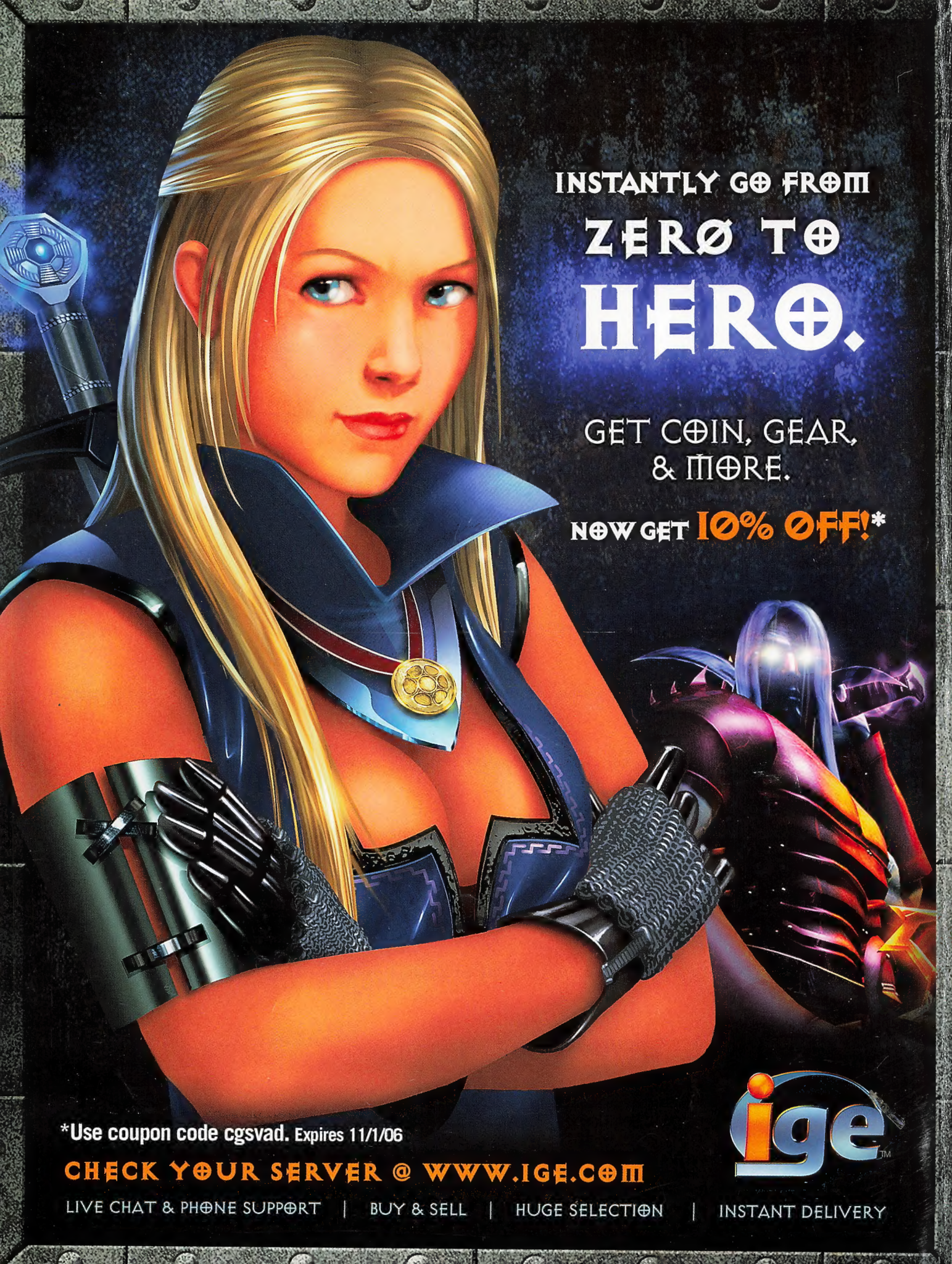
Buy and Sell Used Games

GAME SWAP ZONE .com

auctions for gamers by gamers • www.gameswapzone.com

- Create your own store
- Featured product listings
- Rating system
- Bulk uploading

PlayStation ■ PS2 ■ Xbox ■ PSP ■ GameCube ■ N-Gage ■ Game Boy ■ PC Games ■ DVDs ■ and more


INSTANTLY GO FROM
ZERO TO
HERO.
GET COIN, GEAR,
& MORE.
NOW GET 10% OFF!*
*Use coupon code cgsvad. Expires 11/1/06
CHECK YOUR SERVER @ WWW.IGE.COM
LIVE CHAT & PHONE SUPPORT | BUY & SELL | HUGE SELECTION | INSTANT DELIVERY
ige

Made with love by

Our goal is to preserve classic video game magazines so that they are not lost permanently.

People interested in helping out in any capacity, please visit us at retromags.com.

No profit is made from these scans, nor do we offer anything available from the publishers themselves.

If you come across anyone selling releases from this site, please do not support them and do let us know.

Thank you!